



Natural Is Possible At Cheese Event



TOP PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALESSANDRO VARGIU; BOTTOM PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVIDE GRECO

WHEN CHEESE TAKES OVER AN ENTIRE TOWN, IT DESERVES A CAPITAL LETTER.

Cheese is the name of the biannual show developed by Italy's Slow Food movement, and in the course of 22 years, it has abundantly overrun its host town of Bra in south-central Piedmont.

In 1997, the first year of the show, the event was a homey gathering of about 20 mostly-Italian cheesemakers and guests clustered around a small section of Corso Garibaldi near Bra's main square. Cheese 2019, which ran from Sept. 20-23, 2019, was a world-class assembly of 350+ exhibitors from 20 countries; 225 events, including tastings, workshops, conferences, special dinners, panel discussions, film screenings and presentations; and about 300,000 visitors from five continents.

It took over the entire town center of Bra (population 30,000), and spilled over to the nearby community of Pollenzo, about four miles away. Pollenzo is not a casual choice: Slow Food established a renowned University of Gastronomic Sciences there in 2004, so the two locations are closely linked. A shuttle bus carried attendees regularly between them.

Area lodgings for Cheese book up months in advance, and cars are diverted to large parking spaces outside of town; frequent shuttle buses transported visitors to center city, which became a giant pedestrian zone for four days.

In keeping with the Slow Food philosophy of food that is good to eat, clean for the environment, and fair in price for consumers

To attend Cheese is to experience the present and future of milk's leap toward immortality.

BY CLAUDIA FISI

and conditions for producers, all cheeses on display in Bra had to be made from raw (i.e., unpasteurized) milk. The raw milk rule was introduced at Cheese 2017, a courageous decision, according to some exhibitors.

Hence the theme for Cheese 2019: Natural is Possible.

The theme echoes trends in global consumption, claim exhibitors at Cheese. According to Laure Dubouloz, chief operating officer of Mons Fromagerie, "The general trend in France is in natural cheeses. People are more aware of the environment, where cheese comes from, the merits of local cheeses and how cheese is made. 'Local' means terroir, and people are curious about that."

Nicola Bertinelli, president of the Parmigiano Reggiano Consortium, points out that the naturalness of Parmigiano Reggiano—from the raw ingredients to the way it is processed—distinguishes it from other hard cheeses. "Informed consumers are the real means for natural cheese to win against industrial cheese made

by multinationals,” he says. “Our cheese has been made using the same recipe with raw milk and natural fermented whey for nine centuries.”

‘Natural’ means more than unpasteurized milk; it means know-how, technique, tradition and strict attention to hygiene. Cheeses on display in Bra lacked GMOs, synthetic flavorings such as artificial truffle essence, transgenic rennet, chemically-treated or smoked rinds, artificial preservatives, additives or colorings. Cheeses with bright blue, green, red or purple colorations—and there were some—attracted attention, and their purveyors spent a lot of time explaining to aficionados how these colors were developed naturally.

To underscore the importance of ‘natural,’ Cheese 2019 included products—all made naturally according to Slow Food standards—that either complement cheese

(salumi, bread, wine, beer), share the same origins (butter, gelato) or make use of cheese naturally (pizza). There were even four workshops devoted to Toscano cigars and their affinity with cheese.

A major trend evident to buyers and consumers at Cheese is the sustained focus on the origins and traceability of products: What breeds of cow, sheep, goats? How are they treated? What grass do they eat? How long do the animals graze?

Marjolein Kooistra, a professor at the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences in Rotterdam, explains the importance of a story behind each product. When she first came to Cheese in 2003 to promote



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAOLO PROPERZI

raw milk Gouda, magazines were looking for new products. Specialized cheese shops were opening. “Customers wanted to hear a story and we had one,” she says. Today, everyone wants to hear a story, and all cheesemakers are copying us,” she says.

She lists a series of other trends: an interest in raw milk; younger, fresher cheeses; low fat cheeses; all that is “healthy”.

THE RAW MILK QUANDARY

Cheese made with raw, i.e., unpasteurized, milk ensures rich taste, high production standards, and local authenticity, all reasons why Slow Food stresses its importance in cheese making. Slow Food is so convinced that it introduced a new master’s degree in raw milk and cheese to be offered at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo starting in January 2021. The course will last a year, during which time students will examine the entire production cycle, from animals and their habitat to the phases of milk and cheese production to product sales and consumer behavior.

In France, raw milk cheeses make up about 18 percent of the country’s total cheese production, and well-known French cheeses, such as Camembert and Brie, have been made from raw milk for centuries.

In certain other countries, including Brazil and Armenia, raw milk cheeses can be produced for internal consumption but cannot be exported.

The UK is somewhere in the middle. Italian-born Alessandro Grano has been living in London for 18 years and is head chef at La Fromagerie, a London cheesemonger. He reports that many English still see raw milk as “not safe to eat, based on ignorance,” but he was personally won over when he tasted his first farmhouse Cheddar made with raw milk. “You can taste the notes of fresh milk in a raw milk cheese and sense what the cows ate, the grass they chewed.”

Over the last decade, Grano has seen changes in his adopted country: the appetite for raw milk cheeses is growing and a Raw Milk Producers Association was formed. “Today, the UK produces more different kinds of cheeses than France, thanks in part to the education efforts of Slow Food,” he points out.

The Parmigiano Reggiano Consortium also focuses on education through its presence at Cheese. Its involvement since the

first Cheese in 1997 is part of its strategy to show that a raw milk cheese can be highly profitable. “Ours is the Italian PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) with the highest value at production (1.4 billion Euro or almost \$1.5 billion), a turnover at consumption of 2.4 billion Euro (\$2.634 billion), and an export share exceeding 40 percent. Our consumers need to understand that our cheese price is not too expensive, but reflects what our cheese is worth,” explains president Nicola Bertinelli.

Raw milk cheese costs more than pasturized partly because safeguards are needed to ensure absolute hygiene. Acquaranda of Rome has been producing a traditional raw milk cheese called Caciofiore della Campagna Romana since 2004, but it took two years of study to get the process right. “Working with raw milk is a challenge,” recalls Massimo Antonini, head of Acquaranda. “You have to make sure your bacterial count meets strict regulations. Eleven producers started out to do this in 2002 but only two of us are left.” He isn’t complaining because his cheese sells out every year, mostly to Italians but also abroad.

Slow Food’s insistence on raw milk seemingly eliminates one of the most beloved of British cheeses, Stilton, since a PDO Stilton must be made with pasturized milk. But that didn’t stop Neal’s Yard Dairy from developing a raw milk counterpart in 2006 and calling it Stichelton (the name used for Stilton eight centuries ago). Legend has it that the starter culture for Stichelton came from the original producer of a raw milk Stilton not marketed since 1989. Connoisseurs claim this cheese is Stilton as it was meant to be.

Taste in fact is the ultimate driver of raw milk cheeses. The only reason for using this challenging raw material is to impart a richer taste experience to the consumer. According to Laure Dubouloz, chief operating officer of Mons Fromagerie in France, “Flavor and style are more important to our consumer than raw milk per se.” CC

TESTING THE REACTION TO GORGONZOLA –GOURMET OR GHASTLY?

Prof. Luisa Torri was curious about coriander. It is a type of green parsley known as cilantro in the U.S., and perceived by many as lemony and aromatic. But a minority percentage of the population finds it soapy and repellent, and she is one of those.

She wondered if the coriander conundrum could be a basis for explaining why people develop certain affinities for, or aversions to, other kinds of foods. As Associate Professor of Food Sensory Science and Research Director of the Sensory Laboratory of the University of Gastronomic Sciences, she decided to focus on this dichotomy among cheeses. She began to test students about their perceptions of taste in 2009, looking

for descriptors of specific comestibles.

“Three factors determine our tastes in food,” she explains. “The physiological factor, the psychological factor and the genetic factor. The latter, based on our individual DNA, is a powerful determinant.” She has documented genetic variations in people and found that some are especially sensitive to certain smells.

“Blue cheeses are stronger than, say, Mozzarella, which someone may or may not like, but a Mozzarella doesn’t elicit the same strong positive or negative reaction as do the blues,” she notes.

So she developed a research project to determine what factors may predispose a

person to like or dislike Gorgonzola. “I could have picked another blue cheese like Stilton or Roquefort, but we are Italian, so I used Gorgonzola.”

She sought volunteers among the attendees at Cheese 2019 for her research. She needed 300 participants for her sensory analysis test and wound up with 359. I was one of them. I signed with trepidation because I do not like Gorgonzola. To me, the cheese smells like bare feet on a hot day. The researchers were delighted to have me because most volunteers were Gorgonzola lovers, skewing the results.

Each volunteer sat in a separate cubicle with a computer monitor, a keyboard, a tray

“People are eating less meat so cheese is a logical alternative,” she adds.

In addition, there is renewed interest in blue-veined cheeses and a small but discernable attention to cheeses with vegetable rennets.

Manuel Maia of Tradifoods, a distributor of Portuguese cheeses, observes that blue

cheese and soft cheeses are attractive worldwide. He sees an increased focus on goat cheeses with non-animal rennet. Portugal benefits, since its cheeses are traditionally made from goat and sheep milk with vegetarian rennet.

A renowned pizza maker from Naples, Italy, Federica Mignacca tries to use local

and traditional cheeses in her innovative pizzas. She says there is a trend toward semi-soft cheeses.

Laura Marotta, a retailer in Vercelli, Italy, sees a rising request for blues. “Erborinati (blue-veined cheeses) attract clients these days,” she notes, while Mozzarella is always popular in her shop, La Salsamentaria.

A TASTE OF ITALIAN HISTORY.



*The absence of lactose is a natural consequence of the traditional Grana Padano production process. It contains less than 10 mg/100 g of galactose.

GRANA PADANO, THE WORLD’S BEST-SELLING PDO CHEESE.

A Grana Padano wheel of cheese speaks for itself. It tells us to enjoy life, to embrace a delicate and delicious flavor and to celebrate age-old Italian traditions. Intrinsicly linked to the climate, culture and people of Northern Italy, Grana Padano reminds us that life has a wonderful taste.

PDO: Protected Designation of Origin



ITALIAN EXCELLENCE

PROUD FRIEND OF



with six numbered samples of Gorgonzola, two glass vials, a beaker, a glass tube, a cotton swab, a glass of water and a cracker. After signing permission forms, we were asked to taste each sample twice in a sequence dictated by the computer. Each tasting was followed by a palate cleansing with water and a bite of cracker.

After each tasting in the first round, we were asked to grade the cheese on a scale of 11 levels of like or dislike. After the second tasting, we had to grade each cheese from strongest to weakest with seven levels (#7 was “hot chili pepper in the mouth”).

I was apprehensive about tasting because of my prior dislike of blue cheese, but the experience wasn’t as bad as I had feared. My personal observations about the six

cheeses were:

1. Not horrible, kinda creamy
2. Salty and rather creamy
3. Really soft
4. Firm and very blue, salty and acidic
5. Quite firm and mottled, seasonal and winey
6. Runny with a decided rotten cheese taste

After the second tasting, we put the cotton swab in our mouth for five seconds and were asked to grade the intensity of bitterness on it, using the same scale as before. My mouth was so permeated with cheese that the bitterness barely registered.

Then we opened two glass vials, smelled the contents and described what we smelled based on attributes suggested by

the computer (soapy, pungent, bitter, etc). We could choose as many attributes as we perceived. One vial smelled fruity, floral and pleasant to me; the other was fruity but also soapy.

Finally we spit some saliva—without bubbles—into a tube to provide a DNA sample for the researchers. We were asked our gender, age and nationality because this data can correlate with cheese preferences. No names, though, so no invasion of privacy, an important issue in Europe.

Dr. Torri won’t have preliminary results until late 2020. The only thing I know at this point is that Italians tend to like blue cheese; Americans tend not to.

To request results, write her at sensorylab@unisg.it. CC

Vegetarians eschew cheeses made with animal-based rennet, so they seek out those using vegetable as an acceptable alternative. A number of exhibitors at Cheese offered them—the Portuguese because their cheeses have always been made this way, and some French, Spanish and Italian cheesemakers. One Norwegian cheese, Pultost,

is made with a self-produced culture of lactic bacteria, but that is the exception. The norm for vegetarian cheese is a plant-based rennet. Over the centuries, these have been developed from fig, saffron and gallium, but wild artichoke (cardoom) was the favored choice for Cheese exhibitors.

The interest in vegetarian offerings as

well as raw milk and artisanal cheeses will continue, say exhibitors. What is less certain is the effect climate change will have on animals, grazing lands and, ultimately, cheese. That there will be an impact is unquestioned, but in what ways is unclear. Perhaps Cheese 2021 will provide some answers. CC

The advertisement is a composite image. On the left, a circular plaque features a portrait of Rembrandt and the text "A Dutch Masterpiece". In the center, a wooden cheese board is laden with various cheeses, including a wedge of blue cheese, a wedge of yellow cheese, and a wedge of white cheese, along with nuts and fruit. A large white ampersand is superimposed over the cheese board. On the right, a man and a woman are smiling and holding glasses of beer. The text "The perfect cheese board" is written in a large, white, serif font across the bottom left. Below it, the text "starts with Rembrandt" is written in a smaller, white, serif font. The website "www.adutchmasterpiece.com" is printed in small white text at the bottom left. The "A Dutch Masterpiece" logo is repeated in a stylized font at the bottom right.

**The perfect
cheese board**

**starts with
Rembrandt**

www.adutchmasterpiece.com

A Dutch Masterpiece