

THE B I G C H E E S E

One of the world's best-known cheeses is also the hardest to make. Explore the historic world of Parmigiano Reggiano and the processes that bring it to your table



One of the true glories of Italian cuisine, Parmigiano Reggiano is a handcrafted product that is inextricably tied to the land it comes from. One of the world's oldest and richest cheeses, it was awarded PDO status in 1996, meaning it can only be made in a specific geographical region and must adhere to rigorous production standards.

Among the hills and plains of Parma, Reggio Emilia, Modena, Bologna, to the west of the Reno River, and Mantua, to the east of the Po River, some 350 artisan producers craft the 'king of cheeses' by hand. They use methods dating back some 800 years. It's back-breaking work that takes place every single day of the year – heating and coagulating the milk, cutting the curds and draining the whey.

Every step of the process takes place in this beguiling region. The herds must crop the area's fertile grass and are milked on local farmland, while the cheese is left to rest on wooden tables so it dries to form a natural crust.

The minimum maturation time for Parmigiano Reggiano is 12 months but only when it reaches approximately 24 months of age is it at its best. In order to find out whether it has achieved the perfect ripeness, the cheese is carefully tapped with a hammer. Decoding the noise is a fiercely guarded secret that has been passed down through families for generations.

Its pleasing crystalline texture and umami flavour make it a natural pairing for some of Emilia-Romagna's most mouthwatering specialities. A glass of fruity lambrusco wine is a natural foil, as is the tangy balsamic vinegar produced in Modena. We love delicate slithers of Parmigiano Reggiano with fresh figs, however, it goes just as well with dried plums served alongside an *aperitivo*. Of course, it is integral to all the great pasta dishes from this region – melted into a rich, hearty ragu, sprinkled atop strozzapreti like salty snow and stuffed inside tiny tortellini *in brodo* (in broth).

Although Parmigiano Reggiano is available in most British supermarkets and delis, there's nothing like taking a trip to Italy and bringing it back from the region yourself. Visit a traditional dairy where you can see the *casari* (master cheesemakers) at work first hand, before buying some of their masterpieces at one of the many excellent food markets.

Bologna's Mercato Centrale stretches from Francesco Rizzoli to medieval il Quadrilatero, while Mercato Albinelli in the heart of Modena is home to a glorious range of stalls bursting with fresh, tasty produce. Of course, nutty-tasting Parmigiano Reggiano takes pride of place.

Find a full list of dairies that are open to visitors and gather inspiration for a holiday at parmigianoreggiano.com

Photos by John Holdship; Stefano Scata





COARSE POLENTA
WITH PORCINI MUSHROOMS,
PARMIGIANO REGGIANO
AND SAUSAGE

'The herds crop the area's fertile grass and are milked on local farmland, while the cheese is left to rest on wooden tables so it dries to form a natural crust'



**COARSE POLENTA WITH
PORCINI MUSHROOMS
AND SAUSAGE**

Recipe by Silvana Ghillani
SERVES 2

For the sauce

- 50g dried porcini mushrooms
- 1 carrot
- 1 stick of celery
- 1 onion
- 1 small sprig rosemary
- 1 shallot
- 1tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove
- 2 pork sausages, meat only, skins discarded
- 100ml dry white wine
- 250g tomato paste
- 1tsp tomato purée

For the polenta

- 400g coarse polenta flour
- 1tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1tbsp fine salt

- 1tbsp unsalted butter
- 30g Parmigiano Reggiano, grated

To dress

- Parmigiano Reggiano, grated

For the sauce, soak the dried mushrooms in a bowl of warm water for a few minutes, refreshing the water a couple of times. Squeeze out any excess water from the mushrooms then chop them and set aside, reserving the soaking water to use as a stock.

Peel the carrot then clean and chop the celery, onion, rosemary and shallot.

In a frying pan over a medium heat, add the olive oil, garlic, chopped vegetables and herbs.

When the vegetables have started to soften, add the sausage meat and brown well.

Meanwhile, warm 250ml water. Once the water from the sausage meat has evaporated, add the white wine, let the alcohol evaporate, then add the tomato paste and purée.

Finally, add the mushrooms and the soaking water, the warm water, a pinch of coarse salt and simmer for 2 hours.

For the polenta, put a pan with 500ml water and the polenta on the heat. Add the olive oil and salt, then boil for about 1 hour, stirring constantly. If the polenta becomes too thick, add some more hot water.

Once cooked, add a tablespoon of butter and the Parmigiano Reggiano.

Dress with the porcini mushroom and sausage sauce, add a generous helping of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese and serve immediately.

Photos by John Holdship