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How to Shop for Parmigiano-Reggiano, Prosciutto, and More Italian Delicacies Stateside

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Italian cheese and cured meat
Photo: Alamy



A jaunt over to Italy promises many things—stunning architecture, endless history, rolling vineyards and valley views that will bring tears to your eyes, and most importantly, a culinary scene like no other. When it comes to food—heaps of gelato and pasta included—Italy is where it’s at. Setting foot in the region of Emilia-Romagna, Italy’s food capital, is all it takes to discover the finer things in life. Cue Parmigiano-Reggiano, Prosciutto di Parma, and friends.

Finding these same magical products to nibble on stateside, though, can be a real challenge. When seeking the same quality cheeses, cured meats, and specialty products back home, there are several rules to consider. Thankfully, Italy’s D.O.P., Denominazione di Origine Protetta—or Protected Designation of Origin in English—is like the holy grail of the food world and ensures the authenticity of a product by law. The D.O.P. is the cream of the crop when it comes to rules, requiring each product to be produced, processed, and packaged by way of traditional methods in a specific geographical zone. Frankly put, that Parmesan cheese you’ve been scooping up without a label may not be an example of culinary excellence.



Eataly's cheese counter in New York
Photo: Alamy



With FICO Eataly World set to open in Bologna mid-November and Emilia-Romagna becoming an increasingly popular foodie destination, identifying the good versus the bad is becoming easier. Sebastiano Sardo, Eataly World's supply chain and marketing manager, says that the D.O.P. trademark "must be visible both on the packaging and on the product, itself—so that even in the case of buying by the slice at a meat or cheese counter, the consumer may be able to see the trademark on the product being sliced."

Eataly World promises educational and training courses that "aim to make participants aware of branded product genuineness," Sardo says. "FICO's food producers—40 farming factories—will take care of training and courses to be sure that participants (and consumers) are correctly informed."

Here, Sardo gives crucial tips on how to identify quality Italian products at specialty markets and grocery stores. Our biggest takeaway: Read labels and proceed with caution.

Parmigiano-Reggiano

Be mindful of buying Parmesan in a local grocer's cheese section, as not all Parmesan cheese wheels are created equal. "Over 340 cheese factories situated in the Po Valley—between Mantova and Bologna—make up the Consortium of Parmigiano-Reggiano D.O.P.," says Sardo. "An original form of Parmigiano-Reggiano is recognized from some specific elements on its crust," including dotted and capital letters that read, "PARMIGIANO REGGIANO," "D.O.P." and "CONSORZIO DI TUTELA" signs, a cheese factory registration number, a production date (month and year), and a casein plaque that reads, "Consorzio Formaggio Parmigiano-Reggiano." If there's no trace of the above when buying by the slice, it's most likely not authentic.



Parmigiano-Reggiano
Photo: Courtesy of Jennifer Rice



Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena

It's not until this "black gold" hits your lips that you realize what life has been missing—damn good balsamic vinegar that's never to be used on a green salad. "One of the fundamental elements that distinguishes true D.O.P. balsamic vinegar is its density, which must be syrupy—if it's liquid, it's certainly not D.O.P.," he notes. "Aging takes place in small wooden barrels for a long period of time (a minimum of 12 years). Each barrel is of different wood: durmast, chestnut, mulberry, cherry, ash, and juniper." Plus, the balsamic vinegar can easily be identified by the squat shape of its bottle.



Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena

Photo: Courtesy of Jennifer Rice



Prosciutto di Parma

There's nothing quite like a salty Prosciutto and sweet cantaloupe salad on a sunny day. "Prosciutto di Parma D.O.P. can be produced exclusively in an area of the province of Parma—at least five kilometers south of the Via Emilia, bounded to the east by the Enza River and west from the Stirone stream," Sardo says. "The raw material consists of selected thighs of Large White, Landrace, and Duroc breeds, which must weigh at least 145 kilograms and have more than nine months of age. The true Prosciutto di Parma is recognizable by two signs: the seal "C.P.P." (Consorzio del Prosciutto di Parma) and the five-point crown fire-branding with the word "PARMA."

Culatello di Zibello

Culatello di Zibello is no doubt the “king” of dry-cured meats. Crafted from the muscular inner part of a pig’s thigh, it’s best known for its sweet, delicate flavor. Currently, there are only 13 producers and roughly 50,000 produced in total each year, making it a prized possession. Taking it a step further, Culatello di Zibello can only be made with swine raised in Northern Italy that have been handled and bred according to strict D.O.P. regulations. Given the above and its unique pear shape, it’s quite easy to weed the good from the bad in this scenario.

Prosciutto San Daniele

Another wildly popular cured meat is Prosciutto San Daniele, which can only be produced in the town of San Daniele del Friuli. “One of the characteristics of this prosciutto is its guitar shape,” he adds. “Another specific feature is the presence of the ‘small foot’—the end of the thigh, which is generally eliminated when aging other types of ham.”

Pomodoro San Marzano dell’Agro Sarnese-Nocerino

Recent chatter about faux San Marzano tomatoes has everyone on edge. Truth be told, there are a lot of bad seeds on the shelves, but finding the best ones just boils down to being an educated consumer. For starters, production is limited to Salerno, Avellino, and Naples. “The Agro Sarnese-Nocerino area extends over the Sarno river plain, mostly covered by volcanic material,” Sardo notes. “The fruit harvest is between July 30 and September 30 and must be carried out exclusively by hand.” Rule of thumb: The palatable tomatoes are only sold in cans—whole or fillets—so anything that reads otherwise, such as organic, chopped, pureed, and so forth, is a fraudulent product. A legitimate can should always have a visible D.O.P. symbol.

Pesto Genovese

Pesto Genovese D.O.P. is created with seven ingredients only: Pra’ (Genoa) basil, pine nuts, garlic, Parmigiano-Reggiano, Fiore Sardo (seasoned goat cheese), extra-virgin olive oil from the Ligurian Riviera, and salt—nothing less and nothing more. “The Genoese basil stands out from the other varieties for its small greenish leaves and the delicate scent,” he relays.

Mozzarella di Bufala Campana

The wallet-friendly slab of mozzarella sitting beside the Kraft singles is ultimately the opposite of dreamy Mozzarella di Bufala Campana (buffalo mozzarella). It's a "fresh, yarn-like cheese, which was awarded the D.O.P. brand recognition in 1996," notes Sardo. "Produced exclusively with fresh, whole buffalo milk, its shape is usually round or in the following alternative forms: small bites, braids, beads, cherries, or a woggle [knot]." Once Mozzarella di Bufala Campana hits the palate, there's no turning back to the regular stuff.