



CHEESE!

I Went to Italy and Learned How Real Parmesan Cheese Is Made



by Naomi Tomky

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This is real Parmesan cheese.

(Image credit: [Naomi Tomky](#))

The Parmesan cheese I grew up sprinkling on my spaghetti came straight from a green tube labeled "Kraft." This was before anyone worried whether those jars of Prego sauce were authentic, before we wondered if we should be eating fresh pasta instead of dried, and long before the green tube of "Parmesan" was discovered to **contain wood pulp**.

Wood pulp or no, I maintain a nostalgic love for the pebbled cheese of my youth and would happily toss it on my noodles. But it's definitely not real Parmigiano-Reggiano. In fact, very few cheeses packaged and sold as Parmigiano-Reggiano are.

The real deal is a very specific, certified product that must be made under codified conditions in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy. I know because I went to Italy and learned how real Parmesan is made. More specifically, I visited [Hombre Dairy Farm](#), just outside of Modena, Italy, where they make organic Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.



(Image credit: [Naomi Tomky](#))

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On approach to the entrance, a strong odor of farm washes up. Lines of Frisona and Pezzata Rossa cows nudge their heads out the fence, digging into the piles of feed in front of them, while their udders balloon up in anticipation of their next milking.

The cows get milked each evening and again in the morning, but that step is complete by the time I walk into the milking hall — or rather by the time I walk into the loft above it. The hall itself is for cows, not humans, and signs request silence, to keep down stress on the animals, who do the bulk of the work around here.

From the loft, I can also see the cheesemakers through a giant glass window on the other side.



(Image credit: Naomi Tomky)

They begin their process by skimming the milk from last night, then mixing it with this morning's fresh, unskimmed milk in giant copper tanks. Immediately after the fresh milk pours in (we're talking seconds here), they add whey, mix, and then add rennet.

Just fifteen minutes later, the curds start to form, and the cheesemakers break them up with giant balloon-like whisking tools. Then the copper cauldrons get heated with steam, slowly and gently. The heat is turned off and about 45 minutes later, the curds have come together.



(Image credit: Naomi Tomky)

Working in teams of two, the cheesemakers pull the cheese solids free of the liquid in the cauldron and load them into large plastic rings the size of truck tires, where the cheese rests for nine hours. The cheese then goes into a stainless-steel mold for two or three more days of shaping, before spending 18 to 20 days in a salt brine.

Finally, it takes a single day in a warm room (about 77°F) to start "sweating" — helping create the natural rind — before heading to the aging room.



(Image credit: [Naomi Tomky](#))

For cheese-lovers, little is as mesmerizingly beautiful as a Parmigiano-Reggiano aging facility. Seemingly endless shelves run floor to ceiling, from one side of the room to the other, as far as the eye can see. Cheeses at various stages of aging range from a pale white, the imprint from the identification stamping barely visible, getting darker and deeper, to achieving a richer golden color by the older rows. The cheeses aged beyond 12 months bear the stamp of approval from the consortium.



(Image credit: [Naomi Tomky](#))

The consortium, a governing body which permits the cheese to bear the name "Parmigiano-Reggiano," visits and inspects when a batch is one year old, tapping it with a hammer to listen for any hollowness or imperfection.

Adhering strictly to the process outlined above, within the regional borders of Emilia Romagna, is the only way to get the stamp of approval. Otherwise it's not actually Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Tip: To identify real Parmigiano-Reggiano in the grocery store, look for places that display a whole or partial wheel so you can see the "DOP" stamp. Most cheese shops and grocery stores with cheese counters (including Whole Foods and the Murray's counters in Kroger stores) will carry it. Avoid any pre-grated or shredded versions and look for a piece with rind. Even on a small chunk, you should be able to see the dots stamped on it that say "Parmigiano Reggiano."

At Hombre, the most recently approved cheese (12 to 14 months) is called "Fresco," but they also make "Stagionato" (22 to 24 months) and "Stravecchio" (30 or more months). And Hombre is just one of nearly 500 producers, spread across the region.

Different altitudes and micro-climates, or even multiple kinds of cattle that produce the milk, change the taste. Each has its own flavor, some saltier or with a hint of crystallized crunchiness. All are a world ahead of the little green can I grew up with.