

2: $p^2 = Pecorino$

For a long time my list was p^6 because I refused to include pecorino cheese despite my cousin Giovanni's urgings. One of the problems I had with it was the name "pecorino." The only previous pecorino that I had eaten was "pecorino romano," something that tastes like your gym socks smell, only worse. So, I was averse to trying it. One year Giovanni got on my case and told me, "*Dovresti provare pecorino!*" "You have to try pecorino!" He added, "You cannot write about Tuscan foods without talking about *pecorino toscano*." I have a long practice of ignoring advice from my Italian relatives, but resolved to give it a try so I could tell him how bad the stuff was.

My opportunity arrived a couple of weeks later while researching the Val d'Orcia for a new guidebook. The Val d'Orcia is the most photographed area of Tuscany and provides most of the pictures of cypress-lined roads, sprawling vineyards, and fields of grain in coffee table books and calendars about Italy. It is also the center of the pecorino cheese industry in Tuscany.

As often happens when I'm doing research and charging in and out of churches and museums I realized about 1:00 that my blood sugar had crashed and I was starving. I'd spent the morning hours at the Diocesan and Piccolomini Museums, and the cathedral in Pienza, the capital of pecorino production. I chose the Ristorante La Mensa a few feet from the main gate into the city and ordered an antipasto with a variety of pecorino cheeses and the *primo piatto pici cacio e pepe*.

The antipasto was a flight of three kinds of pecorino accompanied with a sweet, mild roasted red pepper marmalade, an unidentifiable marmalade that made me want to gag, and chestnut honey that was also an acquired taste. Things weren't getting off to a good beginning. But the cheeses that I had

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long avoided were an excellent surprise. The first was a young pecorino, soft, ivory, buttery, and subtly flavored. It didn't need any honey or marmalade. Pecorino is made year round, however fresh pecorino is associated with spring when the sheep graze on fresh grass after a long winter eating hay. It is called *Marzolino* since it is traditionally made in *marzo*, March and may be aged only a few days before arriving on the market. On May first, Italians traditionally eat Marzolino with fresh fava beans.

The second cheese was a firmer middle-aged pecorino (about six months) that was light yellow, firm, with a stronger flavor, that went well with the red pepper marmalade. The middle-aged cheese is good for grating on pasta or eating with fruit, especially ripe figs. It is often called *semistagionato* meaning that it is “half” aged, or half the way to fully aged pecorino.

The third was *stagionato*, aged about a year, gold in color, hard and crumbly with a sharp tang and distinctly salty. It paired well with the honey which softened the tang. I prefer using the *stagionato* grated for pasta *cacio e pepe* or pecorino carbonara. It substitutes easily for parmigiano reggiano and is slightly tarter and not as rich.

I had come in with a bad attitude not expecting to like the cheese but found pecorino to be savory with a pleasant taste. But I wasn't yet convinced that this earned a place on my list of p's; I still had the *primo piatto* to go.

The *pici cacio e pepe* introduced me to a another way to appreciate the cheese and whole new style of pasta. *Cacio e pepe* is the essence of simplicity with three ingredients. First, the noodle, *pici* (pee-chee), is perfect for carrying the flavor of pecorino. Restaurants make *pici* by hand every day. It looks like a fat spaghetti noodle and is works well with strong cheeses and meat and mushroom ragùs. The second ingredient is *cacio* (KAH-choh), a nickname for pecorino toscano. I learned later that people make their *cacio e pepe* with different ages of pecorino from young to old. The trick is to grate the cheese as finely so it melts quickly on the noodle (see recipe at the end of the chapter). The third ingredient is *pepe*, an abundance of course, fresh ground black pepper. My first *cacio e pepe* was made with a young pecorino and I was now convinced that anything that could make this exquisite pasta belonged on my ever growing list of Ps. Finally, p⁷ — Giovanni was right.

Pecorino Toscano vs. Pecorino Romano

The key to adding pecorino to my list is that I had discovered that pecorino toscano should not be equated with pecorino romano. Pecorino refers to the source of its milk, the *pecora* or sheep (some American versions of pecorino romano are made from cow's milk). The romano type is easy to find and inexpensive in the USA (Costco sells tons of it under the Kirkland brand made from sheep's milk in Italy). Pecorino toscano is neither cheap nor easy to find (Whole Foods and King Soopers have it). However, I have only found the firm, sharp and hard *stagionato* aged cheese. There are many sources online, though some are quite expensive.

Producing Pecorino Toscano

The grain fields and grasslands surrounding Pienza make it the leading producer of the best pecorino cheeses in Italy. In any of the many boutique cheese shops in Pienza and other towns in the Val d'Orcia it is easy to find a wide variety of pecorino from soft and creamy to hard and sharp (see Table

4) from different farmers and producers. The shopkeepers offer tastes, just like the *enoteche* offer tastes of wine.

To be labeled *pecorino toscano* and receive the DOP classification (Protected Designation of Origin) farmers must follow specific rules.

The cheese must be made from whole ewe's milk.

Sheep must be fed primarily on green fodder or hay.

The producer heats the milk to 95°-100° F for about 20 to 25 minutes adding natural veal rennet to start coagulation.

For a soft or semi-firm cheese, the cheese maker breaks the curd into corn kernel-sized pieces with a *spino*. The curd is heated a second time for a semi-firm cheese. Then the cheese is pressed into circular molds between six and eight-inches diameter.

The wheels go to aging rooms that are 41°-54° F with humidity levels between 75% and 90%.

Rinds are rubbed with oil or covered in wax to protect from mold. During aging, the wheels are often turned and washed.

Eating Pecorino

Despite adding pecorino to my list, it is different from the other p's in my list; it is an acquired taste. I saw the potential after my meal in Pienza, but I continued to try different kinds of pecorino, expanding my taste and knowledge and liking it more every time I tried it.

The best way to develop your craving for pecorino is to look at the antipasti section of restaurant menus in the Val d'Orcia. At an *Osteria Acquacheta* in Montepulciano I found an antipasto of new, medium, and long-aged pecorino served with a fig marmalade. The long aged pecorino had been aged covered with rosemary, basil, and thyme leaves covering the rind of the cheese wheel.

You will find many ways of enjoying pecorino online including fondue, as part of the cheese plate following an entrée, as an antipasto with honey, marmalade or aged balsamic vinegar, and with *bruschetta*.

Table 4: Types of Pecorino		
Pecorino Cheeses	Age	Purpose
Marzolino	a few days to 30 days	Table eating, especially as an antipasto or grated on pasta
Rosso	at least 20 days	Table eating, easy to melt on <i>pici</i>
Semistagionato	3 months to a year	Table eating
Stagionato	at least 1 year	Most suitable for grating
cenerato or sotto cenere	Coated with ash 6 months to a year	Dry, suitable for grating
peperocinato	3 months	spicy
tartufato	3 to 6 months	earthy

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marzolino	"March" cheese available only in the spring	Soft and creamy
pecorino di fossa	aged in a cave 6 months	
erbe	6 months covered in herbs	rosemary, thyme, bay leaf, basil — the farmers desire