

# KNOW YOUR CHEESE: 101

## Cheese 101

**Asiago** is an Italian cow's milk cheese that can assume different textures according to its aging. Asiago cheese is an Italian D.O.P. product, which means that it can be considered as real by European law if and only if it is produced in its specific origin area of Asiago. Similar cheeses are produced elsewhere, principally in the United States, using different techniques and cultures that produce a cheese of a similar aspect but with different taste. The best known of these is Wisconsin cheese, a mezzano cheese with a sharper flavor than the Italian.

There are two types of Asiago:

**Fresh** Asiago (Asiago Pressato) is smooth and is produced by using fresh whole milk. It ages up to 40 days and has a thin, elastic crust with a soft, buttery inside that is white or slightly yellowish. Fresh Asiago is typically sliced to prepare paninis or other sandwiches.

**Aged** Asiago (Asiago d'Allevo) has a crumbly texture and a flavor slightly resembling Parmesan. It is often grated in salads, soups, pastas, and sauces. According to the duration of the aging the Asiago d'Allevo is divided:

- Asiago Mezzano (middle Asiago) ages for 3-8 months. It is a compact paste, has the color of straw, and a sweetish taste.
- Asiago Vecchio (old Asiago) ages for 9-18 months. It is a hard paste, is straw colored, and has a bitter taste.
- Asiago Stravecchio (very old Asiago) ages for more than 18 months. It is a very hard and grainy paste, is amber in color, and has a bitter, spicy taste.

**Blue cheese** is a general classification of cow's milk, sheep's milk, or goat's milk cheeses that have had cultures of the mold *Penicillium* added so that the final

product is spotted or veined throughout with blue, blue-grey, blue-green, or blue-brown mold and carries a distinct smell, either from the *Penicillium* or from various specially cultivated bacteria. Some blue cheeses are injected with spores before the curds form and others have spores mixed in with the curds after they form.

Blue cheeses are typically aged in a temperature-controlled environment such as a cave. Blue cheese can be eaten by itself or can be spread, crumbled, or melted into or over foods. In the European Union, many blue cheeses such as Roquefort, Danablu, Gorgonzola, and Blue Stilton carry a protected designation of origin, meaning they can bear the name only if they have been made in a particular region in a certain country. Blue cheeses with no protected origin name are designated simply "blue cheese".

The characteristic flavor of blue cheeses tends to be sharp and salty. The smell of this food is due both to the mold and to types of bacteria encouraged to grow on the cheese.

**Brie** is a soft cow's milk cheese named after Brie, the French region from which it originated. It is pale in color with a slight grayish tinge under a rind of white mold. The whitish moldy rind is typically eaten and its flavor depends largely on the ingredients used and its manufacturing environment. Brie is usually purchased either in a full wheel or as a wheel segment. The white outside of the cheese is completely edible, and many eat brie whole.

The cheese is sometimes served slightly melted or baked in a round ceramic dish and topped with nuts or fruit. **Camembert** is a similar soft cheese which is also made from cow's milk. However, there are differences such as its origin, typical market shape, size, and flavor. Brie originates from the Ile de France, while Camembert comes from Normandy. Traditionally, Brie was produced in large wheel, therefore ripening more slowly than the smaller Camembert cheeses. When sold, Brie segments typically have been cut from the larger wheels and its sides are not covered by the rind. In contrast, Camembert is ripened as a small round cheese fully covered by rind. This ratio between rind and paste makes camembert slightly stronger when compared to a brie ripened for the same

amount of time. Once the rind is cut on camembert it typically has a more pungent aroma than brie. In terms of taste, camembert has a stronger, slightly sour, sometimes chalky taste. The texture of camembert is softer than brie, and if warmed camembert will become creamier, whereas brie warms without losing as much structure.

**Fontina** is an Italian cow's milk cheese. Although Fontina is made throughout the year, the best cheese is obtained during the summer months. This is when the cows are moved to an altitude of 1,800 to 2,300 meters and they are fed only with rich grass to give it a distinctive aroma. Although the version from Aosta is the original and the most famous, Fontina production occurs in other parts of Italy, as well as Denmark, Sweden, Quebec, France, and the United States.

The original Fontina cheese from Italy is fairly pungent and has quite an intense flavor. Fontina cheeses that are produced in other countries can be much milder. The Swedish and Danish versions are often found in US grocery stores and can be distinguished from Italian Fontina by their red wax rind. Italian Fontina has a natural rind due to aging, which is usually tan to orange-brown.

Young Fontina has a softer texture while mature Fontina is a hard cheese. The original Fontina from Aosta has an intense flavor with earthy, mushroomy, and woody notes. Versions of Fontina from other countries have a milder, nutty flavor, while being rich, herbaceous, and fruity.

**Goat cheese** has similar overall fat contents to milk cheese, however the higher proportion of medium-chain fatty acids contributes to the characteristic tart flavor of goat's milk cheese. Goat milk is more similar to human milk than cow's milk and is often consumed by young children, the elderly, those who are ill, or have a low tolerance to cow's milk. Although the West has popularized the cow, goat milk and goat cheese are preferred dairy products in much of the rest of the world. Since goat cheese is often made in areas where refrigeration is limited, aged goat cheeses are often heavily treated with salt. As a result, salt has become associated with the flavor of goat cheese.

Goat cheese has been made for thousands of years and was probably one of the earliest made dairy products. In its most simple form goat cheese is made by allowing raw milk to naturally curdle, then draining and pressing the curds. If the cheese needs to be aged, it is often brined so it will form a rind, then stored in a cheese cave for several months to cure.

**Gorgonzola** is a veined Italian blue cheese, made from unskimmed cow's milk. It can be buttery or firm, crumbly and quite salty, with a "bite" from its blue veining.

Gorgonzola has been produced for centuries in Gorgonzola, Milan, acquiring its greenish-blue marbling in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Today it is mainly produced in the northern Italian regions of Piedmont and Lombardy. During the aging process metal rods are quickly inserted and removed, creating air channels which cause the cheese's characteristic veining. Gorgonzola is typically aged for three to four months. The length of the aging process determines the consistency of the cheese, which gets firmer as it ripens.

There are two varieties of Gorgonzola, which differ mainly in their age:

- Gorgonzola Dolce - also called Sweet Gorgonzola
- Gorgonzola Piccante - also called Gorgonzola Naturale, Gorgonzola Montagna, or Mountain Gorgonzola.

**Gouda** is a Dutch yellow cheese made from cow's milk. It is named after the city of Gouda in the Netherlands. One of the most popular cheeses worldwide, the name is used today as a general term for a variety of similar cheese produced in the traditional Dutch manner as well as the Dutch original. Gouda is dried for a few days before being coated with a yellow coating to prevent it from drying out. It is then aged, and during this process the cheese changes from semi-hard to hard.

Dutch cheese makers generally use 6 gradations to classify Gouda:

- young cheese (4 weeks)
- young matured (8-10 weeks)
- matured (7-8 months)
- extra matured (7-8 months)
- old cheese (10-12 months)
- very old cheese (12 or more months)

As it ages, it develops a caramel sweetness and has a slight crunchiness from cheese crystals, especially in older cheese.

**Gruyere** is sweet but slightly salty, with a flavor that varies widely with age. It is often described as creamy and nutty when young, becoming earthier and complex with age. When fully aged it tends to have small cracks which give it a slightly grainy texture. Gruyere is generally known as one of the finest cheeses for baking, with it having a distinctive but not overpowering taste.

In quiche, Gruyere adds a savory flavor without overshadowing the other ingredients. It is a good melting cheese, particularly suited for fondues. It is a fine table cheese, often used with salads and pastas when grated, and is traditionally used in French Onion soup. White wines, such as Riesling, pair well with Gruyere. Sparkling apple cider and Bock beer also pair well with this cheese

**Havarti** is a semi-soft Danish cow's milk cheese. It is a table cheese that can be sliced, grilled, or melted. Havarti is an interior-ripened cheese that is rindless, smooth, and slightly bright-surfaced with a cream to yellow color, depending on type. It has very small and irregular openings, called eyes, distributed throughout.

**Manchego** is a cheese made in the La Mancha region of Spain. It is made from the milk of manchega sheep. Official manchego cheese is to be aged anywhere from 60 days to two years.

Manchego has a firm and compact consistency and a buttery texture. It often contains small, unevenly distributed air pockets. The color of the cheese varies from white to ivory-yellow, and the inedible rind will be yellow or brownish-beige in color. Manchego has a distinctive flavor: well developed but not too strong, creamy with a slight piquancy, and an aftertaste that is characteristic of sheep's milk. Manchego has a variety of different flavors, depending on its age.

There are four versions of maturity sold:

- Fresco - This fresh cheese is aged for only 2 weeks and has a rich yet mild flavor. It is produced in small quantities and rarely found outside Spain.
- Semicurado - This is a semi-firm cheese aged for anywhere from three weeks to three months. It has a milder flavor compared to Curado.
- Curado - This is a semi-firm cheese aged for three to six months with a sweet and nutty flavor.
- Viejo - This is a firm cheese with a rich deep pepperiness. It is aged for one year and develops a sharper flavor the longer it ages.

In Mexico and Spanish-speaking areas of the United States, manchego or queso tipo (manchego-type) cheese is the name given to a cow's milk cheese similar in taste to Monterey Jack.

**Mascarpone** is an Italian cheese made from cream and coagulated by the addition of citric acid or acetic acid, like lemon juice or vinegar. Mascarpone is milky white in color and is easy to spread. It is used in various Lombardy dishes, and is considered a specialty in the region. It is one of the main ingredients in the

modern Italian dessert known as Tiramisu, and is sometimes used instead of butter or Parmesan cheese to thicken and enrich Risottos.

**Roquefort** is a sheep's milk blue cheese from the south of France, and together with Bleu d'Auvergne, Stilton, and Gorgonzola, is one of the world's best known blue cheeses. Though similar cheeses are produced elsewhere, European Union law dictates that only those cheeses aged in the natural Combalou caves of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon may bear the name Roquefort, as it is a recognized geographical indication, or has a protected designation of origin.

The cheese is white, tangy, crumbly, and slightly moist, with distinctive veins of green mold. It has characteristic odor and flavor with a notable taste of butyric acid. The green veins provide a sharp tang. The overall flavor sensation begins slightly mild, then waxes sweet, then smoky, and fades to a salty finish. It has no rind and the exterior is edible and slightly salty.

**Stilton** is an English cheese, produced in two varieties: Blue, which is known for its characteristic strong smell and taste, and the lesser-known White. Both Blue Stilton and White Stilton have been granted the status of a protected designation of origin by the European Commission. The PDO status requires that only cheese produced in the three counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire, and Nottinghamshire and made according to a strict code may be called "Stilton".

Blue Stilton is often eaten with celery or pears. It is also commonly added as a flavoring to vegetable soup, most notably to cream of broccoli or cream of celery. Alternatively, it is eaten with various crackers, biscuits, and breads. It can also be used to make a blue cheese sauce to be served drizzled over a steak, or can be crumbled over a salad. Traditionally, a barley wine or port are paired with Blue

Stilton, but is also goes well with sweet sherry or Madeira wine. The cheese is traditionally eaten at Christmas. The rind of the cheese forms naturally during the aging process, and is perfectly edible, unlike the rind of some other cheeses.

White Stilton has not had the *Penicillium roqueforti* mold introduced into it which would otherwise lead to the blue veining normally associated with Stilton. It is a crumbly, creamy, open textured cheese and is now extensively used as a base for blending with apricot, ginger, and citrus, or with vine fruits to create unique dessert cheeses and has even been used as a flavoring for chocolate.