



## Artisan Products – Parmigiano Reggiano Cheese

We decided to check out authentic artisan products and arranged to visit three of them in the Parma, Modena region. We wondered if you could actually tell the difference between a 12 or 24 month aged product and actually witness the eight century old process.

Parmigiano Reggiano cheese refers to the cheese, rich in protein and easy to digest, that was made around or in the Italian province of Parma. It was named after the area where it was produced to describe the food and the pride of its production. It was said that monks in the Parma area first started making this cheese during the Middle Ages.

As we approached the factory, I wondered what made Parmigiano-Reggiano so unique. Before entering, we covered ourselves from top to bottom with a required plastic outfit and carefully entered the water covered floor area where the cheese was being processed in large copper vats.

The first words were this is fresh unpasteurized cow's milk that comes in the late afternoon, rests overnight letting the cream rise and the skimmed milk from the previous day batches pumps into the copper vats the next morning. Then the full fat morning's milk is added and rennet. We watched intently as the vats cooked along consolidating their contents. The process takes about 12 minutes as the curd breaks up into small pieces. The cheese-maker checked the temperature carefully. As it takes about 45 to 60 minutes for the curd to settle. We went down to see the other sections where the cheese wheels were stored. When we returned, the compacted curd was collected in a piece of muslin, drained, divided in two, and placed in molds. The wheels weigh about 100 lbs.

Any remaining whey is used to feed the pigs from which Prosciutto de Parma, the Parma ham, is produced.

The wheels weigh about 100 lbs and are given the plant's number, month, and production year. A metal form is buckled around the cheese. We progressed to a brining room where we saw wheels of cheese dancing in a brine solution to absorb the salt. After about 20 to 25 days of brining, the cheese wheels go to aging rooms for about 12 months.

The wooden shelves were piled so high that covered the entire side of the room. There must have been thousands of wheels waiting to be turned frequently by a robot. After aging, the cheese meets strict criteria, it is branded with the Consorzio's official seal and placed in storage for aging.

"So this hands-on process makes this so special," I thought. But our guide continued our tour. "These cows are only fed grass or hay, therefore producing grass fed milk, and only natural whey is allowed as a starter. The only additive allowed is salt, which it absorbs during the 20 days of brining.

Stopping at the company store, we sampled Parmesan Reggiano cheeses to experience the taste of cheeses that were aged 12 to 24 months and longer. There was no comparison to the little green container that I called Parmesan cheese at home. It had a rich umami flavor with a sharp, complex fruity/nutty taste and savory flavor. It was just perfect for sprinkling over pasta, stirring into soups, or that addictive risotto.

I know you are wondering at this point and there answer is "yes, one of those aged Parmesan cheeses traveled back home with us."