



Ingredient

# Wheel of fortune

One Parmesan requires half a cauldron of milk, months of patience and years of expertise. The result, finds Tonia George, brings riches to Parma and a sublime cheese to its kitchens

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*Authenticity commands a respect in Italy that verges on the religious.*

Within hours of arriving in Parma, I discover some of the pitfalls surrounding this northern city’s most revered export. “Never, ever serve Parmesan with fish,” I’m instructed in solemn tones. With similar portentousness, I’m warned to “only call it Parmesan if it’s stamped with the mark of Parmigiano-Reggiano”. I even learn that locals will make pilgrimages to Parmesan dairies to try to mend broken bones by plunging their limbs into basins of whey. »

**Creamed Parmesan and cannellini bean bruschette**

Don’t throw Parmesan rind away – it can be a great flavouring tool. Bury it in a pot of minestrone for extra depth, or use it to flavour olive oil for drizzling. If you don’t have time to make the Parmesan oil here, just use extra virgin olive oil.

- **MAKES 8**
- **PREPARATION: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 3 DAYS INFUSING FOR THE PARMESAN OIL**
- **COOKING: 5 MINUTES**

- PARMESAN OIL
- 1 Parmesan rind
  - 180ml Extra virgin olive oil
  - 125g Parmesan, grated
  - 400g tin Cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
  - 2 tbsp White balsamic vinegar
  - 8 slices Rye bread
  - 25g Wild rocket
  - 75g Cherry tomatoes, halved
  - 1 Garlic clove, halved
  - 1 Lemon, juice of half, plus wedges to serve

To make the flavoured oil, place the Parmesan rind in the oil, cover and leave for 3 days in the fridge to soften the rind and infuse the oil with its flavour. Put the Parmesan and cannellini beans in a food processor and blend together with the white balsamic vinegar. With the motor running, slowly trickle in 8 tbsp Parmesan oil. Taste, season and set aside. Toast the bread until golden on both sides. Meanwhile, toss the rocket and tomatoes with 2 tbsp Parmesan oil; season. Rub each slice of bread with the cut sides of the garlic clove and spread with the bean mix. Top the bruschette with the rocket and tomatoes and drizzle with the remaining Parmesan oil and the lemon juice. Serve with the lemon wedges.

**PER BRUSCHETTA** 291 KCALS/22G FAT/5G SATURATED FAT/0.7G SALT/1G SUGARS  
**The Corker recommends** This vivacious mouthful of autumn fruit brings just the right flavour combinations and a note of informality to the bruschette.  
**Via Collina, Dolcetto di Diano d’Alba 2007 Piedmont, Italy. Bin 390208; £6.99.**







Somehow, I'm not surprised. Devotion to this Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) product is such that the *Consorzio di Tutela del Formaggio Parmigiano-Reggiano* – which represents about 500 artisanal cheesemakers in northern Italy – this year fought in the European Court of Justice to win the exclusive right to call their product Parmesan. Hearing this, I feel a pang of guilt as I recall the grim tubs of cheesy dandruff that our nation shook over its spag bols during the 1970s and '80s.

The city that is proud to call itself the home of Parmesan is perhaps not the prettiest stop in northern Italy. Yes, there are elegant streets and piazzas full of historic buildings but Parma is very much a working town and for every loggia, it seems, there are two or three factories. Compared to other cities in Emilia-Romagna it seems that while Bologna philosophises over espressos and Modena shops for glitzy designer goodies, Parma just rolls up its sleeves and gets on with business.

Much of that business, of course, is dedicated to producing two of Italy's most iconic foods – Parmesan and Parma ham – so it's perhaps no surprise that the city is not short of decent trattorias in which to try them. One such is Osteria La Maestà, where I start a long lunch with a plate of the famous ham and some chunks of Parmesan; simple but delicious. There follows a dish of silky smooth *tortelli d'erbette* (pasta filled with Ricotta, Parmesan and Swiss chard), which goes terribly well with a glass of the local malvasia wine. It is over a tender main course of *rosa di Parma* (beef fillet stuffed with Parma ham and flakes of Parmesan) that a waiter tells me another impressive fact about the cheese: it's part of the official diet of astronauts. Yes, up above us, spacemen are chobbling Parma's finest. Without gravity, apparently, calcium levels drop and bones become weaker. Parmesan made it onto the menu because it's not affected by the change in environment; it's also a source of calcium, free from additives, easily digestible and, of course, tasty.

Later, digesting this fact as well as my lunch, I head off to visit one of the *Consorzio's* dairies. Here, I meet Bruno, the veteran *casaro* (cheesemaker), who has been plying his trade for 40-odd years since he was first apprenticed at the age of 16. The cheeseroom is light and airy, its windows thrown wide open to encourage the natural bacteria into the process. "You can have problems

**Previous page:** Parma's picturesque Piazza del Duomo. **Opposite:** Crostini, **bottom left**, make a classic precursor to some pasta made by hand, **top right**; the castle at Torrechiara, **bottom right**, is an imposing sight

Ingredient



**Parmesan gnocchi with chunky lemon pesto**

Gnocchi are quick to cook but take time to prepare. It's worth making a large batch, as they can be frozen – just freeze the uncooked gnocchi on a tray, then bag up. (You can cook gnocchi straight from frozen – they're ready when they rise to the surface.) Serve as a starter.

- **SERVES 8**
- **PREPARATION: 30 MINUTES**
- **COOKING: 25 MINUTES**

- 800g Floury potatoes, peeled
- 1 Egg, beaten
- 1 tsp Salt
- 75g Parmesan, grated
- 180g Plain flour

- PESTO
- 100ml Extra virgin olive oil
  - 1 Small garlic clove, bashed
  - 20g Pine nuts, roughly chopped
  - 30g Basil leaves
  - 1 Lemon, finely grated zest and juice
  - 30g Parmesan shavings
  - 25g Butter

Put the potatoes in a pan of cold water, bring to the boil and simmer for 20 minutes until soft.

Meanwhile, make the pesto. Put the olive oil, garlic and pine nuts in a frying pan over a low heat and stir until the nuts are golden. Transfer to a food processor with the basil and chop coarsely. Stir in the lemon zest and juice and the Parmesan shavings; season and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 120°C/gas 1. Drain the potatoes, return them to the pan over a gentle heat for a couple of minutes to steam off any excess water, then rice or mash in a bowl until

completely smooth. Push the mash through a sieve if it seems at all lumpy. Put another large pan of salted water on to boil.

Beat the egg, salt and Parmesan into the potatoes and gradually add the flour until you have a soft dough that is no longer sticky. Divide into three and, on a lightly floured surface, roll each lump into a 1.5cm-thick log. Cut into 2cm lengths.

Put the butter in a large serving dish and place in the oven, to keep the gnocchi warm once they are cooked. When the water is boiling, drop in a third of the gnocchi and wait for them to float to the top – this should take about 1 minute. Scoop them out with a slotted spoon and add to the dish in the oven. Cook the remaining gnocchi in batches and add to the preheated dish.

Drizzle the pesto evenly over the top and toss gently, to avoid breaking up the gnocchi.

**PER SERVING** 329 KCALS/16G FAT/5.5G SATURATED FAT/0.7G SALT/7G SUGARS

**The Corker recommends**  
Try a vigorous, intense white, such as this vivacious chenin blanc. **Cederberg Sustainable Chenin Blanc 2007 South Africa. Bin 638078; £7.50.**





with dairies that are too sterile,” says Bruno. “New factories often wash down their tiles with whey.” His first job is to skim the cream off yesterday’s evening milk. This skimmed milk is then poured into several large copper cauldrons and mixed with rich morning milk. Whey starters from yesterday’s efforts are added, along with rennet, and the room soon becomes steamy as the milk is heated to coagulate. Bruno uses a balloon-shaped instrument to break up the curds, and the contents of the cauldron are churned with a paddle before being slung into a cheesecloth and heaved over to wooden moulds fitted with stencils, which mark out a distinctive, dotty logo. Each of the huge cauldrons produces just two wheels of Parmesan. There is a lot of by-product created during the process, mainly whey, and this – aside from knitting

**Parmigiana di melanzane**, right  
This is a classic: it’s a meal in itself, but works as an accompaniment too. Keeping the aubergine chunky will help to create a creamy texture.

- **SERVES 4-6**
  - **PREPARATION: 10 MINUTES**
  - **COOKING: 50 MINUTES**
- 3 Large aubergines, sliced into 2cm-thick rounds
  - 5 tbsp Extra virgin olive oil
  - 300ml Double cream
  - 125g Parmesan, grated
- TOMATO SAUCE**
- 25g Butter
  - 2 Garlic cloves, finely chopped
  - 3 x 400g tins Whole plum tomatoes
  - 10g Oregano leaves

Preheat the grill to medium. Brush the aubergine slices on both sides with olive oil, place on 2 baking sheets in a single layer and season. Place on a shelf 15cm away from the element and grill for 10 minutes on each side until tender and slightly charred. Turn off the grill and switch the oven to 200°C/gas 6. For the tomato sauce, heat the butter in a large pan and add the garlic. Cook for 30 seconds, then add the tomatoes and oregano. Simmer, stirring to break up the tomatoes, for 15 minutes until thick. Meanwhile, put the cream in a saucepan and boil until reduced by one third. Take off the heat, add 50g of the Parmesan and season. Once all the elements of the dish are ready, spoon 2 tbsp tomato sauce into a 34cm x 28cm baking dish and place a third of the aubergine on top. Spoon over half the remaining tomato sauce and scatter with half the remaining cheese. Repeat once more with a layer of aubergine, the remaining tomato and cheese and then top with a final layer of aubergine. Finally, spread over the Parmesan cream. Bake in the oven for 15 minutes until golden. Allow to settle for 10 minutes and serve warm, rather than piping hot.

**PER SERVING (6)** 495 KCALS/46G FAT/24G SATURATED FAT/0.7G SALT/9G SUGARS

**The Corker recommends** This inviting dish goes well with almost any full-flavoured red. Why not try this juicy, exuberant blend of two classic Italian grape varieties grown in Argentina? **Santa Julia Organica Bonarda/Sangiovese 2007 Mendoza, Argentina. Bin 435316; £6.99.**

**Bruno (centre) and fellow cheesemakers show off the tools of their trade, opposite bottom right. Tasting Parmesan requires special knives, above and opposite top right**

*The cheese is churned with a paddle before being slung into a cheesecloth and heaved over to wooden moulds with stencils, which mark out a dotty logo*





*The sliver I try is a sublime mix of milky, salty sharpness, and is soft but with that granular crunch. It’s a world away from the dehydrated rind lurking in my fridge at home*

the broken bones of Parma’s wounded – is turned into Ricotta or fed to pigs being reared for Parma ham.

The cheeses rest before being brined in huge troughs of salted water, where they bob around like fairground ducks for 20 days. Finally, they are taken to the maturing rooms, where the milk proteins break down and the amino acids crystallise, giving the cheeses that characteristic, granular texture. After a year, they are evaluated by the consortium and either left to mature further, or marked with grooves to be eaten young.

It’s time to try the cheese. Cue a theatrical process involving a hammer and a selection of traditional knives. Once a cheese passes the hammer test – to prove there are no air bubbles inside – five different knives are plunged and twisted into the rind, to encourage the cheese to crack along its natural grain. I half expect a magician’s assistant to pop out, but instead, a sweet, lemony, creamy fragrance hits my nostrils. The sliver I try is a sublime mixture of milky, salty sharpness, and is soft but with that granular crunch. It’s a world away from the dehydrated rind lurking in my fridge at home.

So, too, are the cheeses on the trolley that’s wheeled to my table that evening at the Ristorante Parizzi; it holds three hefty chunks of Parmigiano-Reggiano. I am introduced to subtle nuances of flavour and the saying that a cheese should see two summers to become a good one: it is in summer that it undergoes the most intense enzymatic transformations. There’s a 30-month cheese, granular and complex; a younger winter cheese, buttery and soft (butterfat remains inside cheese made in winter, instead of rising to the surface); and one from the hills, rich from the milk of cows grazing on mountain pasture.

On the plane home, I picnic on Parmesan – feeling, at this altitude, almost like an astronaut with special rations. At the first bite, I resolve never again to neglect my Parmesan. And vow never to put it on fish!



**Pears poached in red wine and peppercorns with Parmesan cream**

The salty, savoury kick of the cream contrasts beautifully with the syrup-drizzled pears here, making this dish a terrific option that manages to combine both cheese course and sweet pudding.

- **SERVES 4**
- **PREPARATION: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 1 HOUR SETTING**
- **COOKING: 30 MINUTES**

- PARMESAN CREAM
- 125g Parmesan, thickly grated
  - 250ml Double cream
- 400ml Red wine, such as barolo
- 2 tsp Whole black peppercorns
  - 100g Golden caster sugar
  - 2 strips Unwaxed lemon zest
  - 4 Rocha or Williams pears, peeled, cored and quartered

Put the Parmesan and cream in a saucepan. Stir over a gentle heat for 10 minutes, or until all the cheese has melted. Take off the heat and pour into a bowl. Allow to cool and chill for about 1 hour until it has set solid.

Meanwhile, place the red wine, peppercorns, sugar and lemon zest in a pan large enough to

hold the fruit snugly. Bring to the boil and add the pears. Simmer for 15 minutes, turning the pears regularly until they are tender. Remove the fruit to a bowl and boil the syrup until it forms large bubbles and becomes thick and jammy. Strain onto the pears, discarding the lemon zest and reserving the peppercorns.

To serve, put a few pear pieces on each plate with a scoop of the Parmesan cream; drizzle with the syrup and garnish with a few peppercorns.

**PER SERVING** 649 KCALS/43G FAT/27G SATURATED FAT/0.6G SALT/42G SUGARS

**The Corker recommends**

This savoury-sweet dish makes an interesting wine challenge. It’s just the kind of thing to which Australia’s unique sparkling shiraz reacts well.

**Banrock Station Sparkling Shiraz NV, SE Australia. Bin 29806; £8.79.**