

Untold Italy Episode 94 - 8 Cheeses You Need to Try in Italy

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 94.

Buon giorno! Ciao! Hi everyone, How are you all doing today? And what little things have you done recently to keep your Italian dreams alive? I like to add something Italian to my days wherever possible, whether it's preparing myself a little aperitivo or choosing something fabulous to wear in the bella figura style.

Katy

I happily take inspiration from the magnificent and incomparable Sophia Loren who famously quipped "Everything you see I owe to spaghetti," and by the looks of it she owes spaghetti a lot! So who's to argue with Sophia. We eat and enjoy pasta a lot in our house. And listen to Italian songs and say ciao! A lot too. It's so much fun

If you're looking for more ideas to bring a little piece of Italy into your life, our friend Maria Pasquale's new book "How to be Italian" has just been released with lots of great tips and insights into living Italian style. Maria appeared on our podcast last year and has relocated back to Rome over the summer. Her book is all about the essence of being Italian - from what to eat and drink, to what to wear and how to wear it and lots, lots more.

Apart from these great tips It's also full of gorgeous pictures and illustrations that take you right there to beautiful Italy as you turn each and every page. You can find How to be Italian by Maria Pasquale on Amazon and bookstores around the world. It would make a wonderful gift for your Italy loving friends (or yourself!)

Speaking of gifts, a wonderful surprise arrived on my doorstep this week. It was a package of goodies sent by my lovely friend Olivia who lives in Torino or Turin including some delicious hazelnuts, chocolate and wine. Aren't I lucky?! Torino is the capital of the Piemonte region and is famous for these delicacies but it's also famous for cheese! So I invited Olivia onto the show to talk about formaggio or cheese from this region and Italy in general. Olivia and I have bonded over a love of Italian food and wine since we met around a year ago and I'm so happy she's joined us today to talk about one of my favorite topics! So let's bring on the formaggion

It's Katy here dreaming of Italy and ready to share more beautiful stories from the bel paese with you.

Katy

Benvenuta Olivia. Ciao. And welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

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Olivia

Ciao, Katy, super happy to be back here and talking to you again.

Katy

I'm so happy you're here, too. And how are things in beautiful Torino.

Olivia

Torino is beautiful at the moment - it's my favorite time of year because we're going into autumn or fall, and it's just a beautiful time because we've had the Vendemmia, so the wine harvest, all the colors of the leaves are changing. And so the Langhe area is absolutely beautiful out in Piemonte in the countryside and Turin itself is starting to get a little bit colder. Perfect weather for a Bicerin - going into one of the beautiful historic cafes and having that delicious chocolate coffee drink and snuggling up. It's very, very romantic and sort of whimsical at the moment here.

Katy

I love that photo that you posted the other day on your Instagram account of - it looked like Paris was kind of like a little bit of Paris in Italy. Lovely.

Olivia

Yeah, exactly, exactly.

Katy

Now Liv, some of our listeners may remember you from our episode earlier this year about Piemonte, but can you introduce yourself to our new listeners before we delve into the incredible world of formaggio or Italian cheese?

Olivia

Yeah, definitely Katy. So my name is Olivia. I'm from Melbourne, Australia originally, I've been living in Turin and Piemonte for the last two years, but in Italy for two and a half years now. I'm really passionate about food and wine and Italian cuisine, the Italian language. And I initially moved to Italy for what was meant to be a year on a working holiday, sort of working in agriturismo/wineries and learning more about Italian culture and regional Italian cuisine. And then, long story short, I met my Italian boyfriend, the pandemic hit and here I am, still in beautiful Turin.

Katy

If you're going to be stuck somewhere, you might as well be somewhere where they've got lots of lovely wine and cheese.

Olivia

Exactly.

Katy

So we haven't known each other. We're probably known each other - about a year, right? And one of the things that we really bond over is a love of Italian food and, of course, cheese. And because we've been giving out Untold Italy Insiders a deep dive into Italian cheeses, I thought we could let our listeners have a little taste of what we discussed. So I just wanted to go from the top because Italy produces a lot of cheese, doesn't it? It's like - a huge amount of cheese. I think it's one of the top producers in the world.

Olivia

It is and actually, I was reading that 70% of the milk in Italy is converted into cheese, which is crazy. And as a country, obviously, they eat a lot of cheese. They're not number one, which I think is Denmark, the number nine on the list of cheese. Apparently, it's 22 kilos per capita that's eaten in Italy, which is pretty huge.

Katy

I think there's like, well over 2000 varieties, traditional varieties. I think some of them are recognized as products of repute of the DOP products which are - they're - how would you call them? They're sort of like standardized products or?

Olivia

Yeah. Exactly. So I actually wanted to talk about that because it's an important thing to note is that the protected designation of origin and so the definition is a food classification or label that identifies products that are produced, processed and prepared in specific geographical area, using the recognized know how or traditions of local producers. So even though there's thousands of different cheeses in Italy, the ones that actually have that special classification, there's only 48. So it's still a lot. But the ones that go through those rigorous processes, there's 48 that are recognized.

Katy

And they're called D.O.P, if you're looking at a label, you'll see that says D.O.P, right?

Olivia

Exactly. Yes. So in English we call it P.D.O, but yeah, when you're here in Italy, you'll see it as D.O.P. on the label. Similar thing for wine. That's D.O.C.

Katy

Yeah - that's good to know. I mean, and that's probably a good point, isn't it? Because they've really elevated the cheese to the level of the wine. So if you're going to be having these excellent wines, you better be having an excellent cheese to go with it. I think.

Olivia

Definitely. Definitely.

Katy

Okay. So what about we start off by talking about a few of these cheeses and, you know, like exploring where they come from and what the process is and why they're different. Should we start off with the most famous one?

Olivia

Parmigiano-Reggiano, let's do it. So this cheese. Yeah. Obviously it's world famous and it's exported in the world. And actually, I was reading that in America, it's one of the most imitated cheeses, but it's actually not the real Parmigiano-Reggiano - the D.O.P. Product, because it's produced in America, not in Italy, in Emilia-Romagna. If you see in the States or Australia, you can get obviously, the proper imported products, the Parmigiano-Reggiano, but if it's produced in America or the States or elsewhere, it's known as Parmesan cheese. So that's something that I think when you come to Italy, you definitely have to try the real Parmigiano-Reggiano, because there's just nothing like it and it goes through - it's got the strictest, most rigorous methods to be classified as a D.O.P product. So perhaps they can maybe talk about what some of those things are, because I think it's interesting to see and understand how much care is put into that cheese. So a few points about the Parmigiano-Reggiano, as I was saying, it's from Emilia-Romagna, but it can only be produced in the provinces of Parma, Reggio Emilia, Modena, Bologna and Mantua. So quite a contained area. And they need a lot of this milk - so it comes from cow's milk to produce a wheel of Parmigiano Katy. So it takes 550 liters of cow's milk to make just a single wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano. Which is huge.

Katy

Wow.

Olivia

And the thing that is interesting to me as well is that it's still produced to this day, according to an 8th century old method, the same ingredients and techniques. That's just crazy. That

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the history that this cheese has, I guess it has to be matured for a minimum of twelve months.

Olivia

Quite often it goes on to be 24 months, 36 months, 40 months. But it can actually be matured for even longer than that. And the longer it's matured and the more granier sort of piquant - the taste of the cheese is. It's delicious at every stage, I think, but it sort of depends what you want to use the cheese for which we can talk about as well. And talking about the different quality inspections to be classified as a PDO product - what happens is after that minimum maturation period of twelve months, they have a consortium of Parmigiano-Reggiano, so a team of, I guess you could say, cheese experts, which sounds like a fun job who carry out a test, which is the quality inspection. And so they tap the Parmigiano wheels with a sort of hammer and they were able to understand/they're able to hear if there is a defect inside the cheese, which is just quite incredible, that they can understand that. And so at that point, if you can understand it as a defect, it won't go on to become a Parmigiano-Reggiano and if there's no defect, then obviously it will continue the maturation process for either 24, 36, 40 months. I mean, every single wheel of parmigiano goes through this quality inspection. So it's very rigorous.

Katy

Wow

Olivia

If we talk about the history of the cheese as well. So it's been around for a long time. And actually the first evidence is from 1200. And this is interesting because I guess you could say this about a lot of food in Italy, but it was first produced by monks. And the reason that they produced Parmigiano was because they wanted a long lasting cheese. And obviously Parmigiano can be aged for a long time. It doesn't go bad. So it was perfect. And another point that I found really interesting about this cheese going back to the 17th century was the Duke of Parma made the designation of origin official. So the D.O.P status with this cheese. This is apparently the very first cheese that made the DOP come into play because he wanted to be able to brand the cheese that was originally called from Parma with this designation of origin, which is now acknowledged at a European level. So the first - I guess you could say the very first D.O.P product, which is interesting.

Katy

The original cheese.

Olivia

Yeah, exactly. The original long lasting cheese.

Katy

But it is so good. Liv and I are both from Melbourne and I don't know if you remember this Liv but growing up, we would have these Parmesan cheese. And it was pretty gross, like it would come in a bag. And I don't even think it was in the fridge. Like, what on Earth was it? But you had it and it was kind of salty and it was kind of it added a little something, something to the pasta. But you just taste the real thing and you're almost crying because it's just such a travesty because this cheese is just - I love all those little - when it gets a little bit older, it gets those little crystallizations inside the cheese. And it's a little sort of flavor bomb. Almost that when you bite into it. And, oh, my gosh, I love that Parmigiano-Reggiano. And you know what? I really prefer an older one. I don't know about you, but because the younger ones who don't get that crystallization, those little salt crystals. And I bought one chunk the other day and it was a little bit too young for my liking. And I was a little bit disappointed when I got at home and my husband said, "what's this?" And I went, "I think it's a young one. I'm sorry!"

Olivia

Yeah, exactly. I totally agree with you. I like the older aged cheeses as well. The aged Parmigiano is something really delicious. And you can have the aged Parmigiano as a dessert course as well, or in place of your dessert at the end of a meal because it is so rich and so delicious by itself to eat it like that. Probably the younger Parmigiano is better to use as the grating cheese of your pastas.

Katy

Yeah. I kind of tend to do both as I'm cooking.

Olivia

Yeah.

Katy

Have a chunk of cheese, have a bit of a stir. So, I'm kind of liking maybe at least 24 month or into 36, I like.

Olivia

At least! Exactly. And it's really interesting. I should have mentioned when you're asking about Turin - that we've recently had the cheese festival in Piemonte, which is run by slow food every two years. It's held in a little town in Piemonte called Bra. And while we're at the cheese festival, we saw them opening a wheel of Bra, Italy,. And if you've never seen how they open it, you have to Google it now to see how it happens. It's really incredible. And it's quite hard work opening this enormous wheel of Parmigiano. It takes a bit of time, but, yeah, we got to taste that wheel of freshly opened every two years. It's held in a little town in

Piemonte called Bra. And while we're at the cheese festival, we saw them opening a wheel of Bra, Italy,. And if you've never seen how they open it, you have to Google it now to see how it happens. It's really incredible. And it's quite hard work opening this enormous wheel of Parmigiano., and it was amazing. There's really nothing like it. So it's definitely a cheese that you have to try in Italy, even if you've tried it, you know at home.

Katy

Yeah, totally. And I think what I love about the Italians is that they will use all of it. So when I'm getting sent out to the shops to get the Parmigiano, I'm under strict instructions to not get the one with the rind all the way around because you're paying for the rind, which you can't use for most of it. But in Italian cooking, they will use the rind in lots of dishes to use it all up, which I think it's fantastic. They're not as fussy as my husband, they're going to be using all the rind to make soups and risotto.

Olivia

Exactly.

Katy

Adds flavor.

Olivia

You can actually ask for that here in the delicatessen. When you go and buy your cheese, you can ask if they have any rinds because you use it to put in your broth or the stock when you make it or the soup or even past the dishes. So you can actually get that here.

Katy

I think it's that, umami, which is that they call it the sixth sense almost don't they. And I think it's one of those flavor things that makes you want to eat more.

Olivia

Yeah it's addictive.

Katy

Totally is. Have you ever been to one of the factories of the Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Olivia

No, but I definitely need to, it's on my list. And yeah, obviously, if you're going to do that, you do it in Emilia-Romagna. So I need to have a foodie weekend there to go and visit one.

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Katy

Oh, that sounds terrible. I actually, when we were going there, I keep saying this - in March 2020, we had actually booked a tour of one of the farms there. And the best thing to do if anyone wants to do that is to actually get onto the consortium website. And I will actually provide that to people because you can go through different types of farms and factories where they actually make the cheese to obviously the very specific recipe and process. But there's bigger ones and smaller ones, and they have different types of offerings. So we chose one which had a farm with baby goats. I love baby goats and we had the kids with us. So we wanted them to have a bit of a farm day. So there's definitely heaps of ones you can try there actually. You might get to try that really aged one with a bit of balsamic vinegar. Oh, my gosh.

Olivia

Oh, exactly. I was going to mention that - that that's great to put on top of the cheeses, because of course, balsamic is famous for Emilia-Romagna from Modena as well. So it goes hand in hand with the Parmigiano.

Katy

I know if you get the really aged sticky one that just - god oh, my gosh. I'm so hungry. We've only talked about one cheese Liv - what are we going to do?

Olivia

I know, but it's interesting I wanted to mention, because when you're at home as well as in Italy, so you can find cheese that's sort of similar to Parmigiano-Reggiano. And you've probably heard of it. Grana Padano. So Grana is often used interchangeably with Parmigiano, but they are actually quite different and in terms of the quality inspection. So I thought that was an interesting point as well. So if you're wondering because Parmigiano is a lot more expensive than Grana, so if you're also wondering which one you should choose, Grana is great as well, but there are reasons for why the Parmigiano is the more prized cheese, the more expensive cheese. So a few of those include, for example, the production zone. So Grana is produced in a bigger area, so it can be produced in 33 provinces, which is a lot more than the ones that I was mentioning before for Parmigiano. There's no additives in Parmigiano. Even what the cows eat is different from Parmigiano to Grana. Parmigiano it's a really strict diet for those cows - they're only eating hay and grass, but for Grana, they can also be fed silage, and the minimum maturation period is a lot longer for Parmigiano so Grano can be matured for minimum of 9 months. But the Parmigiano has to be at least 12 months. And often you're buying a cheese that's a lot older than twelve months when you're buying Parmigiano, so as I was saying, up to even 40 months old, and just with the quality inspection, as I mentioned that's carried out on every single wheel of Parmigiano with Grana, it's not the same case - so every couple of wheels. But it's still a delicious cheese. But there is a reason for that price difference.

Katy

Yeah, for sure, for sure. It's really interesting because I once went and had a bit of a presentation on the Grana Padano cheese, and they're very proud of their cheese in Lombardy. My goodness, it was 1000 year old recipe. We had the whole - it's made from raw cows milk, and but I mean, I love it too, but I think you're right. I think that there's definitely those specific reasons. I mean, what I love about Italy is they're so so proud of their produce that wherever you go, they say it's the best in the world. And I don't think there's any like objective. If you go on the banks of Lake Garda where these people were making their Grana Padano, they were like, well, we make the best olive oil and the best Grana Padano. I'm like "okay".

Olivia

And the best wine!! Yeah.

Katy

Well it all tasted pretty good to me and I quite liked it though, but yeah, it is really interesting to note just that they have found some ways to kind of look objectively at those production processes and the quality of the cheese, much like they do with the wine too, actually. So it's a really interesting. It's a culture. They respect their food so much that they're going to look into that. And I mean, I can't believe now looking back that I ate that parmesan cheese from that bag, you know, that wasn't in the fridge. You just think about it when you think about it logically. It's like you really want to know - if you're going to be eating something, you want to know that it's had a good life, that it's been eating some delicious grass. Parmigiano-Reggiano. Delicious. Delicious. I can't wait to go back there. Alright. What's the next cheese that you wanted to talk to us about?

Olivia

Next, we're going to Pecorino. So this is another well known cheese that I'm sure people have tried, but you definitely need to try in Italy because there are a lot of different kinds of Pecorino. So going back a step - Pecorino, we're talking about a sheep's milk cheese. Pecorino comes from the word pecora, which means sheep in Italian. And so it's produced quite widely in Italy. But then when we talk about D.O.P product, there's 7 different D.O.P Pecorino cheeses. And so if there are D.O.P status, they need to be aged for 8 months or longer. So we're talking about a hard cheese - stagionato cheese. And so the different D.O.P varieties that you can try when you're here in Italy - so there's the Pecorino Romano, which I'm sure people have heard about. And that one's produced well from the recipes from the Lazio year region where Rome is obviously the capital. There is the Pecorino Sardo and that one is from Sardinia, there's the Pecorino Toscano from Tuscany. And then there's a Pecorino siciliano from Sicily. And they're probably the most famous ones. And then they all obviously have similarities. They're all pecorino. But there are differences as well. So maybe we can talk about some of those differences. And if I start with the one from Sardegna.

Katy

Yeah, sure. But I think it's really important as well to note that it is sheep's milk cheese to Liv, even though she is a cheese lover, is actually lactose intolerant. But that is not a problem when you eat Pecorino is it?

Olivia

No, exactly. And actually something that's nice about Parmigiano-Reggiano, because it's a stagionato, it's aged for so long it's naturally lactose free. So I can have the Parmigiano and the Pecorino. If you're lactose free, you can do that too.

Katy

Good to know.

Olivia

So shall we take it to Sardegna?

Katy

Yes. Let's go to Sardegna.

Katy

Let's go - so Sardegna is actually famous for their sheep and sheep farming has been around for centuries in Sardegna. They've got lots of sheep, so it's perfect for making the delicious Pecorino there. And Pecorino Sardo at those actually the only pecorino made with 100% sheep's milk now, because some of the others can actually mix in milk from other animals, so cow. In Sardegna though, it's just the sheep. And there's two different types. So you can get sweeter version of the Pecorino, which means it's matured for a shorter period. It's a little bit more delicate and then you can obviously get the aged version. So 5 or 6 months or longer, and it's obviously a more intense flavor than the less mature cheese. Something I wanted to mention that people I might have heard about is there is an interesting local delicacy in Sardegna. You've probably heard about this one. It's considered a delicacy to the locals. It's called Casu Murtzu, which translates literally as Off Cheese. This is a Pecorino that they allow the flies to fly into the cheese and lay the eggs, the lava, and then they eat that. Now okay, that might sound - not particularly appetizing to some people, but it is really considered a delicacy, and it's part of the local tradition. They're the local customs. The EU has actually banned the sale of this Casu Murtzu cheese, but you can still find in sudden you're the locals who love that cheese - you can bet that they're still eating that even though they're not, technically allowed to be selling it. So if you're brave and you're in Sardegna (you won't find that really in other but regions) if you're in Sardegna, you can ask, you know, quietly, they might have some of that cheese if you'd like, if you'd like to try it.

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Katy

Have you tried to Liv?

Olivia

No, I haven't. Look, maybe next time I am in Sardegna, I might. I need to just get my head around a little bit first, I think. Or maybe I don't and I should just dive in and try it.

Katy

We know that you're very brave around cheese.

Olivia

Yeah, I'm brand, but I'm not sure if I'm that brave. We'll see next trip.

Katy

But I think it's, you know, some people like to do those hardcore food challenges where they eat cockroaches or whatever. This is the Italian. This is probably the Italian version of it right - gonna eat the maggot cheese.

Olivia

Exactly. Maggot cheese. But the pecorino there is - obviously you can get the normal pecorino without the lava - and it is delicious. It goes very nice with a glass of white crisp wine or pecorino, which is actually a grape variety too. Don't get confused between the wine and the cheese - they do go nicely together.

Katy

People in our Insiders group know how much I love the Pecorino wine that I discovered, and I was like, I like to show off mine Italian wine knowledge now and I'll be like "I'll have the Pecorino" and everyone has it and they go "oh this is delicious" I'm like "I know!" Branching out from the Chardonnay.

Olivia

Exactly. It's delicious. So from Sardegna though, maybe we should take it to the Pecorino Romano, which is another famous Pecorino. And what we should say, though, is that actually the majority of Pecorino Romano is actually now produced in Sardegna. They've got the space. They've got the sheep. Yeah, which is - it's funny because it has the name Pecorino Romano, and it's from the recipes from the region of Lazio, but it's not really produced there. Only 4% is still produced in Lazio.

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Katy

Well that's a bit outrageous, isn't it? Like they're in the key dishes like your Carbonara, Cacio e Pepe, alla Gricia. They're all made with Pecorino Romano. I wonder if you can find a restaurant where they actually use local Pecorino Romano. That'd be interesting.

Olivia

I know they're definitely, there's still farms producing the Pecorino Romano in Lazio, but there's not many. The production is really in Sardegna now, but it is still produced according to the Lazio year recipe and the same techniques. But it's made with the sheep from Sardegna. And it's quite an old cheese. It really was first produced around 2000 years ago in that countryside surrounding Rome, and it was really important for the Roman diet, but not for the wealthy, not for the nobility. It was originally considered a food for the poor and given to soldiers.

Olivia

So back in war times, it was given to Roman soldiers because it lasts for a long time. And still to this day - so it is obviously quite a famous cheese, it's in the diet, it's in all the famous pasta dishes from Lazio from Rome - so as you were mentioning, the Amatriciana, all Gricia - so it's definitely still a celebrated product and a classic way to enjoy it if you're in Rome in the Spring - the way that a lot of locals eat it is they'll have it with fava beans. It's a classic combination, the fava and the Pecorino Romano.

Katy

Again, it's that, umami, is an extra added saltiness, and it's very delicious. I love it. Fantastic. But, you know, I don't think it's not such a rustic cheese here in Australia. If you want to buy a good Italian Pecorino Romano, you're gonna be paying upwards of \$50 a kilo for it. So yeah, it's considered quite a delicacy here. And I'm sure in the US as well.

Olivia

Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. But here, look, Pecorino, you can find all the main variety of D.O.P product. It's very easy to get your hands on it Pecorino Romano, Pecorino Sardo compared to some of the other cheeses that we'll talk about because it's used so widely in a lot of the dishes and it ages, it stores well. So it's not a fresh cheese that needs to be eaten within a day. So it's very accessible to find Pecorino when you're here.

Katy

Yeah. And now Liv you're recently back from Tuscany, aren't you? Where you visited the cheese town of our dreams, which is also a place they produce Pecorino.

Olivia

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Exactly. So we can't talk about Pecorino without mentioning Pienza, which Katy spoke to me about as well, because she loved Pienza and they're famous for the Pecorino. There's just something so delicious about the Pecorino from Pienza when you taste it. You can taste the difference between the Pecorino from Sardegna or Pecorino Romano, definitely. And the one from Pienza almost has perhaps a little sweeter taste. They say it's all to do with what the animal is eating. So that goes into it. And flora and fauna around that area around Pienza is quite untouched, I guess. And another reason is the type of rennet that they use. So in normal Pecorino, they use the goat rennet to curdle the sheep's milk. But the one from Pienza uses a calf rennet, which they also say contributes to the milder, more delicate taste.

Katy

Interesting. And they also put things in that one, too, don't they? They make it even more delicious when they add certain flavors.

Olivia

Exactly. So you can get different spices. You can have it with truffle, which is a favorite one for me. You can have it also wrapped even in vine leaves. You can find lots of different varieties. And when you go to Pienza, that town is filled with Pecorino shops. The streets literally smell of Pecorino. So if you like Pecorino you're in heaven in Pienza.

Katy

Absolutely. And I think one thing that's really good to mention for those harder cheeses, you would do this as a softer one, but it's actually quite easy to take them home to most places, even Australia, which we've got very, very strict quarantine rules here in Australia. And you'd have to - do check before you leave, but when we were living in the UK, we bought back a few big chunks of that cheese I can tell you because what they do is they vacuum packet so it stays fresh. So it's definitely worth doing that.

Katy

It's probably the best souvenir if someone wants to go to Italy and come and bring me back a souvenir that's what I want!!

Olivia

Yeah, I agree. Definitely. The same Pienza. We've got a whole lot of cheeses all vacuum sealed. So we've got a nice store of Pecorino for the next couple of months.

Katy

I really think you're going to have to take a photo of your fridge - to see how much cheese you've got in there. You've got a lot. Oh, that's so funny. Then they also in Pienza, they have a very famous festival don't they - which I really want to see one day.

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Olivia

Mee too!! So apparently it is the last week of August. But yes, check those dates depending on what year you're going. And it is a Sagra or through festival that celebrates the Pecorino, from Pienza, and apparently they have these competitions where they roll the shoes down the hill, which you've spoken about with me before too Katy.

Katy

I reckon I would run down the hill very quickly after a big round of that Pecorino. If I could keep it at the end for sure.

Olivia

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. But it's a beautiful town. So it's worth visiting as well. And yes for the added bonus of the cheese.

Katy

You can't discount this place - it is so beautiful. And yes - it has the other bonus of the cheese I can carry. It's one of my favorite places to visit in Tuscany, if not Italy, and I've spoken about it before. Alright. Now Liv on to the next cheese, which is in Piemonte, which is a very, very strong region for cheese actually, and a lot of D.O.P products are produced in Piemonte, which people don't generally visit so much, which is a shame. But Liv did an episode with us earlier in the year where she spoke about some of the amazing places that you can visit in Piemonte. But apart from visiting beautiful places, it's a really great place to eat cheese. So what's the first one from Piemonte?

Olivia

The first cheese is called Toma cheese. And so if you speak to my Piemonte, their boyfriend, he'll tell you what's the best cheese in Italy. Not that he's biased at all, but Toma is quintessential - for me - it's a quintessential Piemonte cheese. And it's not very easy to find in other parts of Italy, especially not in the south. I've never seen it when I've been in the south. And actually, I've never really heard of Toma cheese until I moved to Piemonte, never seen it in Australia, for example. And I'm not sure about the US, but I can imagine it's quite difficult, if at all that you could find it there. And, yeah, it's a really delicious, really delicious cheese. It's a D.O.P product. The D.O.P mark is a water to the Toma cheese that's produced around Novara, Vercelli, Biella, Torino and Cuneo. So there's some of the towns in Piemonte, and there's another handful of Comune near Asti and Alessandria that can produce the Toma and have that D.O.P status. So Toma can be made with either a cow or a goats milk. Or you can get a mix of the 2. The age of the cheese we're looking at at least 15 days, but it can go up to 60 days as well. So it becomes a lot more intense, obviously, the longer it aged, just like all of the cheeses that we've been talking about. It's quite a salty cheese, and it can become almost

a little bit spicy, they say piquante, as it ages, a little bit more intense. And we - at the cheese festival that I was mentioning before in Bra, there was a lot of Toma obviously being held in Piemonte, this cheese festival - there was a lot of Piemontese cheese producers, and it is such a special cheese. Probably our favorite stall was from one of these Toma producers, dairy farmers, that the cheese was just - out of this world. Incredible, delicious. It was aged for 60 days. So quite an old cheese. And to look at it, it was to kind of give you a visual inside the cheese, it's quite creamy and white and all the outside, it's covered in like, sort of like a dark brown, sort of almost looked like a dirt (not to put anyone off). And you can eat that rind. And it is delicious. It's so good. So, yeah, good Toma when you're in Piemonte. When you're in Piemonte, you definitely need to try it.

Katy

And that goes really well with the local wines there doesn't it? So you'd be wanting to have your time up with a glass of Barolo.

Olivia

I think with all of the cheeses, you'll often find that they go well with the wine that's produced in the area. So you want to be trying some Nebbiolo or the Barola. Dolcetto also goes really well. So probably more of a full bodied red wine to match it with the Toma, especially if you're having an aged Toma, you know the 60 days or so. It's delicious. And another way that I wanted to mention just while we're talking about Piemonte, there is a famous (in Piemonte) spread, I guess, or conserve that they have with the Toma cheese, and it's called Cognà So that is very Piemontese and it's made from grape must. So obviously, Piemonte is a region famous for wine, and they use up all of those grapes and to the leftover grapes you can use to create this conserve. It goes really nicely with cheese and a glass of wine, and it's very delicious.

Katy

So is that something that you would go at and you'd have that for Aperitivo, or is it sort of more like an after dinner or is it something you just cut a chunk off and slap it on some bread with some of the cognà?

Olivia

Any which way really? Cheese is big in Piemonte. It is really a region famous for cheese. And Toma is probably the most famous cheese in Piemonte or the we'll talk about a couple of other ones in a moment. But yeah, you can have it for Aperitivo, or you could have it as part of after the after dinner course instead of your dessert. You can have it - the kids go off to school with their sandwiches with the Toma cheese- like it is the cheese - you can stir it into the risotto, you can have it with the polenta or the pasta. Yeah, it is THE cheese I would say of Piemonte - if you had to pick one.

Katy

Amazing. I need to go try that. And obviously, because it's so young, I mean, it does get aged for 60 days, but that's not really gonna go on a boat or a plane too well on a boat or a plane, I wouldn't have thought so. You have to go to Piemonte to try it.

Olivia

Exactly. You have to. Yeah. And it's quite difficult to even find that in other regions. So if you're not in Piemonte, you really might not be able to find it.

Katy

Right. Well, there's another reason to go to Piemonte. Excellent. All right. So what other cheeses do they have there?

Olivia

So the next one I wanted to talk about is Castelmagno. So again, we're in the region of Piemonte - we're up north, and this is a dairy product too, made from cows milk. And they can also add in goat or sheep milk, depending on what they've got left, so that they use up all of the product, all of that milk. And it's quite a strong and intense cheese. The Castelmagno often has the blue or green vein through the cheese that it takes from mold. So it can be sort of a blue cheese, but it's a little less intense than a traditional blue cheese, but it is a strong cheese in itself. So if you like strong cheeses, then you need to try Castelmagno. It's an after dinner cheese. It's definitely an after dinner one. You're going to have these paired with maybe cognà or another savory marmalade or maybe a nice aromatic honey, something like that. A classic way that they enjoy Castelmagno cheese is having that with risotto. So they put little chunks of these into - it'll melt into the rice and it's really, really delicious. So it's good during winter time or when it's a little bit colder.

Katy

That does sound very good. I think the risotto is like a really good base. And if you add something that's got like tons of flavor, it really elevates it to a whole other level. Oh, it might be my ultimate comfort food. I think it's delicious.

Olivia

Or another way, is with gnocchi - if we're talking about comfort food.

Katy

I can sign up for that one. Definitely. I've not seen that one myself either. So is that another one that is hard to find outside of Piemonte?

Olivia

Yeah. Again, I had not heard of this cheese until I came to Piemonte. I hadn't seen it in other regions. So if you're not up North, I would say it would be very hard to find that Castelmagno. You need to come to Piemonte to try it.

Katy

You know, I'm there. You know, I'm there. Alright. And there's one more that you wanted to tell us about too, wasn't there?

Olivia

Yeah. Exactly. So look, I'm going to claim at the moment as Piemontese, but it was traditionally it's born in Lombardia or Lombardy. So Milan is the capital of Lombardy and it's Gorgonzola. So this is another well known cheese, I'm sure a lot of people have tried or at least heard about. And it's a blue cheese. So again, this is one for lovers of strong cheese. Today, though, the majority so 65% of Gorgonzola is produced in Piemonte, which is why I'm claiming it at the moment as a Piemontese cheese, and it's made from cows milk, it's a blue cheese. But it is a bit milder than perhaps other blue cheeses that you might have tried. So it's still intense. But if you have tried blue cheese before and you perhaps haven't enjoyed it, give gorgonzola try because he's a little bit milder than other blue cheeses. It's really delicious. And again, it needs to age for a minimum of 50 days, so it takes on that mold and you can get a two different varieties. So the one that's age for a shorter time period. So they call that Gorgonzola Dolce. Dolce means sweet in Italian. So this one is softer, creamier, milder, essentially. And then there's the Gorgonzola Piccante, which is more intense, more crumbly, a stronger taste. And that one needs to be matured for at least three months to develop that more intense strong pungent flavour. Very delicious. One of my favorite cheeses, gorgonzola.

Katy

Yeah. I think it's one of the first times that I tried a black or blue cheese, and I love it too. I love it. I just think it needs a little bit of sweetness to go with it just to - especially when you've got the older one - just to break through that saltiness and just delicious. I like to have it with, you know, sometimes dried fruit or.

Olivia

Yes, exactly. Yeah. It's great on a cheese board. And another way that they eat it here again. Polenta is very famous in the north. So they have that with Polenta melted through - it's very good comfort food while we're on the top of good comfort foods - it's another one.

Katy

Oh, absolutely. And I mean, I think it's really important to note for those of you who have maybe these are some new adventures in cheese. Is that - take a note of these cheeses. And if you're going into these regions, make sure you try it. If you've seen them on the menu, these are the local dishes. They've come not very far. That's what people know. They're going to be celebrating that food and definitely try them because it's easy to go with the ones that, you know, I think don't worry, you're going to find Parmesan Reggiano wherever you go, but if you try some of these other cheeses, you'll just open up a whole other area of taste. You know, the stories behind the cheeses and you talk to the makers and the history behind them is so fascinating as well, I think.

Olivia

Definitely Katy. Yes. I totally agree.

Katy

All right. Well, are we allowed to leave Piemonte now? We've discussed all those cheeses.

Olivia

We can. We can. We're not going farther. We're going to Lombardia, because we need to talk about Taleggio, which is another delicious cheese produced in the north. And this one is another cows milk cheese primarily produced in the autumn and winter period. So something that we haven't mentioned, I guess what we've been talking about these cheeses is that cheese and Italy is seasonal. So just like all the other products that you're enjoying, all the fruit and vegetables, cheese is also seasonal. There's obviously now an increased demand for a lot of these products, so they do produce it year round. But traditionally, cheese has been a seasonal products. So Taleggio was what was and still is produced in autumn and winter. It is another D.O.P product. So there's certain provinces that it currently produced in. So we're talking about provinces of Bergamo, Brescia, Como, Cremona, Lecco, Novara - which is in Piemonte. If you haven't tried Taleggio cheese, it is, I guess we could say a little bit smelly a little bit stinky in a good way. In a good way. It's a soft cheese. It just adds to the flavor. I think - the smell, it has quite a sweet taste. It's buttery, creamy. It's quite aromatic, and it is a super delicious. It is semisoft. It's aged for - so talking about an aging period for around 35 days, you're gonna get softer cheese. What else can we say about it? It's got a really like melt in your mouth feel, which if you don't like the sound of that then I don't know what you like because it's just delicious.

Katy

It's got like an orange rind, too, hasn't it?

Olivia

Yes. And it's a washed rind cheese as well. So they do weekly brushings of the rind with water and salt, which could contribute the flavor and also the color. That's where the color comes from because of those weekly brushing, those bathings.

Katy

Well, if the cheese has been bathed, it's probably gonna taste pretty nice.

Olivia

Exactly. And so, yeah, how can you enjoy the cheese and have it on a cheese board. But traditionally, how people eat Taleggio cheese in Lombardia is stirring it into the pasta, the risotto, the polenta. It's a cheese that melts really well. So another comfort food cheese up in the north.

Katy

Oh, have you ever had a Taleggio toasty? That's a toasted sandwich for anyone...

Olivia

Yep.

Katy

You have? Oh, my gosh.

Olivia

Yeah. It's great melting cheese. A bit of that bit of prosciutto, maybe a bit of tomato. Yes, it's delicious.

Katy

Oh, my gosh. I think I'm gonna go sort that out. It should be coming if it's autumn there and they're making it, maybe we will get it. We might be lucky. You never know. Yeah.

Olivia

I'm gonna have my eyes open to that. Also, it's produced in Piemonte. You can definitely find it in Piemonte and Lombardia, of course.

Katy

Yeah. So I think it's worth mentioning as well, isn't it? When you go, if you're in these towns or in these regions and you go into the supermarket, it's really fascinating how they stock the local cheeses, even in a supermarket where, as we mentioned before, we can have the

bagged parmesan cheese or just know your standard cheddar, whereas they will stock the local - it's more like what we would consider to be a delicatessen or a specialty cheese shop. You know they have everything there.

Olivia

I agree. Yeah. They put a really good range of cheeses and local cheeses in most of the supermarkets. And then, of course, they've got the specialty artisan cheese shops as well, which are also worth checking out. Yeah but the supermarket, yeah you can find quite good cheeses at the supermarket as well.

Katy

I mean, obviously, if you can get to a cheese festival that's like next level. And if you can get to a local market, that's pretty good too. I just think it's really interesting that even in the standard supermarkets that they have a much broader range of cheese, then we would consider having here.

Olivia

Yeah, definitely. It's very celebrated. And something about Taleggio that I wanted to mention just as a sort of curious fact. A curious - curiosity, I guess - is if you've ever heard of Casanova, he apparently was an old fan of the Taleggio because it used to have a reputation and being an aphrodisiac. So he quite enjoy getting into the Taleggio before he'd rendezvous with different women. So. Yeah, I thought that was quite interesting to mention. Good old Casanova.

Katy

Good old Casanova - I wonder if he took any to Venice with him because he used to go about on a gondola didn't he?

Olivia

Yeah, probably. Yeah, exactly.

Katy

Yeah. He had it all worked out didn't he - good on him! Well, they obviously know a lot about cheese in the north of Italy. But what about down in the south? Have they got the cheese sorted out there too?

Olivia

They sure do. And cheese in the south as well, I like, it is equally delicious. It's a lot fresher, the cheese, for example, we're talking about Mozzarella, Burrata, Straciatella, if any of

these names are ringing a bell. And it really is just incredible. You have to eat. Let's start with Buffalo Mozzarella. You have to eat that when you're in the south, particularly in the region of Campania, you can also find it in Puglia, and Molise - there's the DOP status in those regions as well. And it really Katy I'm going to steal your words, but it really is life changing this Buffalo Mozzarella.

Katy

You think you've had it and you're like - even though we have moved on from the bagged cheese - but even then, I thought I'd had Mozzarella. Oh, my gosh. No, not at all. And you definitely have to go out to one of the farms there. And in one of our earlier episodes on the Cilento Coast, our friend Danielle was telling us about the farm there where you can go try the Buffalo Mozzarella. And yeah, it's definitely - if you're a foodie, if you're interested in any way interested in food, you have to go do that because it is in fact life changing.

Olivia

It is incredible. I remember a few years ago when we were in Naples and we did a food tour - walking around there and we tried the Buffalo Mozzarella and also the smoked version. Oh, my God. Yeah. I was the same. I thought I tried Mozzarella before - but I'd never. I'd never had it - had something like that. It just - it really is incredible.

Katy

I know it was the same with my friend and Jacks and I. We were sitting in this street and they have these little stalls in, the middle of Naples, and we were just sitting there and we were just looking at each other going, what is happening here? And this is after we had probably already had three or four bites of the food tour. It was like the heavens had opened. What is this taste? It's unbelievable.

Olivia

Yeah, it is incredible. The best place to have it. As I said in the south, because of ok yeah, you can find Buffalo Mozzarella in the north, but the best time to have it is actually 8 to 10 hours after it's produced, so the less it travels, the better. And there's a few things that people perhaps should know about the mozzarella, if you're going to buy it when they're in the south. When you buy it, you want to eat it as quickly as possible, because you also shouldn't refrigerate Mozzarella. So if you don't refrigerate it, you also don't want it to go off. You really need to eat it within the day that you're buying that cheese, ideally, if you can, if you're not going to eat it within an hour, you need to leave it. It comes when you buy it in a bag with the liquid, you need to leave it, you know, sitting in that liquid of the bag that you buy in, because if you take out, it completely dehydrates and you'll be left with the cheese, that's nothing like what we're talking about. So you want to eat it fresh, you want to eat it in the south, and as soon as you see it, you want to be sort of diving into - you don't want to

leave it overnight, and you really don't want to put it in the fridge either. Completely changes the flavour.

Katy

Yeah, totally. And I guess our guide said to us, yeah, you want to be eating it straight away or the absolute maximum you should leave it is 48 hours. And I was thinking, I don't even know how to last that long to be quite honest with you. It's delicious. But, I mean, even just the simplest things in the Caprese salad, just with just some beautiful tomatoes and Basil and a drizzle of olive oil, it doesn't need much. It doesn't need much at all because it just - it can stand on its own 2 feet. And boy, like, literally, I can talk about this for an hour, actually, this just this topic of this cheese itself, because it's just so delicious. So if you're a down south, try it.

Olivia

And I think there's a difference as well. So when you're in Italy, so we're talking about the Buffalo mozzarella that's produced from the Water Buffalo. There's other mozzarella as well. So there's the Fior di Latte which is the cow's milk. And so the reason that the buffalo mozzarella, I mean, they're both delicious, but there's a reason that the buffalo mozzarella is so prized, that animal is quite a delicate, fragile animal. It needs a lot more care, it yields less milk - when I say that, I mean, the milk that it produces actually a bigger percentage of water. So it's a product - well an animal that needs to be really cared for and looked after to produce this end result, and you can definitely taste it. The Fior di Latte Mozzarella is also really delicious. But yeah, there's nothing like the buffalo, if you ask me. Yeah.

Katy

And I don't know if you follow this one account on Instagram called @burratagram. Burrata is kind of like, sort of loosely connected to these cheese. And if you want to torture yourself, if you're hungry, you just go into these Instagram account and check out @burratagram because it's just like oozing cheese cheese being opened all over the pasta. And it's amazing.

Olivia

Yeah. So Burrata is related to the mozzarella, and it's the mozzarella with the addition of cream. So it's even more creamy and delicious. If you haven't tried that one, you definitely need to try it. And with all of these cheeses to the mozzarella, the burrata or the stracciatella, which stracciatella, just to briefly say is the burrata but cut up into strips. You don't want to cook them, so you want to have them fresh, you can put them to top a pizza - you often find that here, which is also delicious, but you never put the cheese into the oven. You want to be eating it fresh to enjoy that creamy, delicious flavor.

Katy

Yeah, the cheese will probably be crying if it got put in the oven. "Don't put me in the oven." Oh, my goodness. I feel like going to the cheese shop. We've got a really, a few really good ones here and I just go browsing. I'm a bit likely - I think I'd come home with about five different ones and say "oops -sorry".

Olivia

I guess we're eating cheese for a week.

Katy

But I think, as you mentioned, like, the really good thing is that you can find a cheese that is going to really suit what you like. And so really talk to people - if you're at a market, talk to someone about what you like. If you can use a few words or if you know you like the harder cheeses, then just have a go, because they usually - they're just delicious. Unless you're going to be in Sardinia and you're going after the one that's forbidden, you're going to be pretty safe.

Olivia

Exactly. You can't go wrong. And I guess you should eat the local cheeses too, I think. As we said, you're going to find Parmigiano, oh everywhere - but where you're going - do some research and find out what cheeses are produced there because they're just going to be delicious. And you're going to have a really great experience if you stick to what's local and what's produced in that region.

Katy

Yeah, totally. Ah Liv - thanks for sharing all these amazing Italian cheeses with us. I recognize I create an epic cheese tasting itinerary, of course, ending with that life changing Buffalo Mozzarella just down south. And I just keep dreaming of that cheese. So now I know people will be hungry. Sorry about that, everyone. But if they want to keep up with your adventures in Italy, how can they follow you?

Olivia

So I've got an Instagram account called Livguine. So that is my nickname Liv combined with pasta linguine. So it's Livguine on Instagram. And I post lots of food photos and Italy photos.

Katy

And cheese. Lots of cheese. Oh, brilliant. I am so looking forward to the day when we devour a cheese plate together, and it will be a very happy day.

Olivia

Definitely. Can't wait.

Katy

Exactly. So Grazie. Thank you Liv for joining us on Untold Italy again today.

Olivia

Grazie mille. Thanks Katy. Thanks, everyone.

Katy

OK so that's 8 cheeses we've learned about .. only 400 more, give or take, to go! Don't you think it's incredible how many different ways these simple ingredients can be manipulated into so many delicious and different varieties of cheese. I am constantly in awe of this and the fact that many of these delicacies have taken centuries to perfect. While we can easily access commercially made cheeses by the truckload in most parts of the western world, there's something to be said for this slow and considered approach don't you think?

Olivia and I would love to know how many Italian cheeses you've tried and what your favorites were. And, let's face it, if they were life changing because you know I'll be hot footing it to where they make it as soon as possible. You'll find Liv online at @livguine on Instagram and livguine.com is her website. We'll put all her details and the information on all the cheeses into the show notes at untolditaly.com/94

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That's all for today, next week we're going to learn all about the art and culture of Italian coffee

But until then it's "ciao for now"