

NEW ITALIAN FAVORITES

Parmesan Particulars



Practical Science: Domestic Parmesan vs. Parmigiano-Reggiano

Domestic Parmesan, the kind you find in the average U.S. supermarket, is a different beast than Parmigiano-Reggiano, which is produced using highly codified, traditional methods in Italy. What the cows eat will affect the flavor of their milk and the resulting cheese. In Italy, the cows designated for Parmigiano-Reggiano graze outdoors; in the United States, most cows are not pastured but generally eat a concentrated feed.



In addition to differences in diet, there are different and unique microflora and yeasts in the milk. The American practice of heating the milk for pasteurization kills these microorganisms. However, since Italians use raw milk to make Parmesan, these microorganisms add unique flavor components to the cheese that can give you extreme highs and lows of flavor. It's not just the milk that's different in the United States. American cheese makers often use nonanimal rennet to curdle the milk. And the starter cultures differ, with Italians using the whey left from the cheese making of the day before, while Americans generally purchase starters from enzyme manufacturers. Finally, each cheese-making company will have slightly different microorganisms in its environment, which alters the flavor of the cheese being produced.

Buying



While we found a couple domestic brands that passed muster, nothing beats the spicy, nutty flavor of authentic Parmigiano-Reggiano. Always buy a wedge with a piece of the rind attached; this way, you can see the signature imprint stamped on the rind and know that you are getting what you're paying for. Plus, in blind tastings of samples of cheese taken from three locations on one wheel of 18-month-old Parmigiano-Reggiano, we discovered that samples taken closest to the rind earned the highest rankings. Tasters commented on the "nutty," "complex," "sharp" flavor and "pleasantly crumbly" texture. The sample taken from the center of the wheel was often described as "clean tasting" with a "smoother," "plastic" texture. The crystal count also painted a clear picture. Cheese right next to the rind averaged 20 crystals per 10 grams of cheese, while the center cheese averaged less than nine crystals per 10 grams.

The takeaway? **Seek out corner pieces of Parmigiano-Reggiano at the supermarket.** Not only will you get the authenticity guarantee of the stamp on the rind, but you'll also be buying the best part of the wheel.



Exterior Parm

This strip of Parmesan, with visible tyrosine (the crunchy crystals within the cheese), was described as "nutty," "complex," and "pleasantly crumbly."



Interior Parm

This strip of Parmesan, which appears plastic in texture, was described as "clean tasting" with a "smoother" texture.

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The Best Tools for Prepping Parmesan

For finely grated cheese, we prefer to use a rasp-style grater. **Microplane** makes our favorite. This tool makes quick work of a block of Parm, yielding fluffy, fine flakes that melt or incorporate easily into sauces and fillings.

We love the look and texture of shaved Parmesan in raw applications like salads, where you can really appreciate its sharp, nutty flavor and crystalline texture. The easiest way to shave Parmesan is with a vegetable peeler. We found the Y-shaped **Kuhn Rikon Original Swiss Peeler** produced the smoothest shavings, thanks to a razor-sharp blade and a ridged guide.

If you're looking for coarse shreds of Parmesan, we like the **Rösle Coarse Grater**. This easy-to-store, flat grater makes shredding a breeze and, unlike box graters, it fits over medium and large bowls.

Storing

To determine the best way to store Parmesan cheese, we consulted several experts. There were several points on which everyone agreed. First, it is best to buy small pieces of cheese that will get used up in the course of a meal, thus reducing the need for storage. Assuming that there is some cheese left to store, everyone agreed that the relatively humid vegetable crisper was the best spot for it in the refrigerator.

In terms of storage, it was acknowledged that the cheese should be allowed to breathe, but just a little. Full and prolonged exposure to air oxidizes the cheese, which degrades both flavor and texture. So the cheese should be wrapped in a way that limits its breathing. The three specific wrapping recommendations were as follows: (1) wrap the cheese in a slightly moistened paper towel and then in a layer of aluminum foil; (2) wrap the cheese in parchment paper and then in either plastic wrap or foil; and (3) simply wrap the cheese in parchment, wax paper, or butcher paper alone. To these ideas we added the two methods used most often by home cooks: (1) put the cheese in a zipper-lock bag and squeeze out the air before sealing, and (2) wrap the cheese directly in plastic wrap.

At one week, the sample wrapped in paper towel and foil seemed slightly soft and chewy, the parchment-wrapped sample was starting to dry out a little, and some tasters felt they detected a faint "off," sour flavor in the plastic-wrapped sample (a new sheet of wrap was used every time the cheese was rewrapped after tasting). The best flavor and texture belonged to the cheese wrapped in parchment and then foil, though the cheese simply thrown in a zipper-lock bag was almost as good. And so it went. At the four-week mark, the parchment and foil-wrapped sample was still the best of show, followed closely by the zipper-lock bagged cheese. At the six-week mark, both of these samples were still fine.

Our conclusion, then, is to stick with the easiest method. **If you must store a small piece of Parmesan, just toss the cheese into a small zipper-lock bag and squeeze out as much air as possible before fastening the seal.**

