

## In a Class of Their Own

Natasha Lardera (July 10, 2009)



DOP certification guarantees that specific foods and agricultural products are authentic and of superior quality

Sometimes just getting on with our daily lives can be difficult. There are so many things to know, so many consumer warnings and health risks to keep track of, that even the simple act of eating can become stressful. The good news is that with some simple guidelines, the food you eat can be of superior quality and a source of pleasure rather than a cause of stress!

The first and most important step is to carefully read food labels. They should have all the

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information you need. If you are a lover of authentic, high-quality Italian food, you have probably run into these acronyms: DOP, IGP, and STG. What do they stand for? We'll clarify these important standards with a series of articles that will divide the Italian Peninsula and its products from north to south.

The code DOP stands for Protected Designation of Origin, IGP means Typical Geographic Indication, and STG Guaranteed Traditional Specialty.

The DOP standard, which we are going to examine in this and subsequent articles, is

guaranteed by the European Union and was created to promote the authenticity and artisanal characteristics of certain foods and agricultural products. The skilled artisans who develop these foods produce their designated specialties in specific regions. Italy accounts for about one-fifth of all the DOP products in Europe (there are 109 in total), which are split into the categories of cheese, fruit and vegetables, cold cuts or meats and olive oils.

The IGP classification is a seal of origin; it's easier to obtain and the guidelines are less strict than DOP. STG classification protects the traditional value of the production process. It aims solely to maintain specific methods that have stood the test of time.

Many of these products are growing in popularity in the United States, which imports thousands and thousands of them regularly. Following are the DOP products from the northern part of the Italian peninsula:

### **VALLE D'AOSTA**

- Fontina (cheese)
- Valle d'Aosta Fromadzo (cheese)
- Valle d'Aosta Jambon de Bosses (cured meats)
- Valle d'Aosta Lard d'Arnad (cured meats)

### **PIEDMONT**

- Asiago (cheese)
- Bra (cheese)
- Castelmagno (cheese)
- Gorgonzola (cheese)
- Grana Padano (cheese)
- Murazzano (cheese)
- Raschera (cheese)
- c (cheese)
- Taleggio (cheese)
- Toma Piemontese (cheese)

- Salamini Italiani alla cacciatora (cured meats)
- Riso della Baraggia Biellese e Vercellese (cereal)

### **LIGURIA**

- Riviera Ligure (olive oil)
- Basilico Genovese (vegetable/fruit)

### **LOMBARDY**

- Bitto (cheese)
- Formai de Mut dell'Alta Val Brembana (cheese)
- Gorgonzola (cheese)
- Grana Padano (cheese)
- Parmigiano Reggiano (cheese)
- Provolone Valpadana (cheese)
- Quartirolo Lombardo (cheese)
- Taleggio (cheese)
- Valtellina Casera (cheese)
- Salame Brianza (cured meats)
- Salame di Varzi (cured meats)
- Salamini Italiani alla cacciatora (cured meats)
- Garda (olive oil)
- Laghi Lombardi (olive oil)

### **TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE**

- Asiago (cheese)
- Grana Padano (cheese)
- Provolone Valpadana (cheese)
- Sprezza delle Giudicarie (cheese)
- Stelvio o Stilfser (cheese)
- Garda (olive oil)
- Mela Val di Non (vegetable/fruit)

### **FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA**

- Montasio (cheese)



- Prosciutto di San Daniele (cured meats)
- Salamini Italiani alla cacciatora (cured meats)
- Tergeste (olive oil)

As you can see, the north of Italy is home to many delicious cheeses, cherished on dining tables worldwide. Fontina is made exclusively in the region of Val d'Aosta, according to an age-old recipe dating back to the 12th century. The rather mild climate of this peaceful valley, nestled between majestic snow-capped mountains, is ideal for creating Fontina's incomparable flavor: faintly nutty and buttery. It's a delicious table cheese, but it's also excellent cooked. Fontina is a star in regional dishes such as bistecca alla valdostana, the local steak with melted Fontina, and fonduta, a rich cream of melted Fontina.

As far back as the year 1000 A.D., Asiago cheese was produced with whole milk by farmers in Piedmont. Now, it's manufactured commercially and has become extremely popular. Asiago cheese is produced in two forms: fresh, also known as pressato, and mature, which is called Asiago d'Allevato. The former has an off-white color and a mild flavor, while the latter has a more yellowish color and is somewhat grainy in texture. It's excellent for crostini, spreads, frittatas, and almost any way you choose to enjoy it.

Gorgonzola is Lombardy's pride, and Grana Padano its glory. The former is frankly, rather ugly and odorous, but with a pungent taste and a luscious consistency. Its secret is penicillium, a mold inside the flesh of the milky-white cheese which gives the cheese its signature flavor and colored veins. The blue streaks give it a robust, full, piquant flavor all of its own. Gorgonzola is enjoyed both aged and young, with polenta, on pizza, and in decadent sandwiches.

And what can we say about Grana Padano? It debuted in the twelfth century, thanks to Lombardian Cistercian monks who began using excess cow's milk to produce cheese with a long lifespan. Grana Padano is a semi-fat hard cheese that is cooked and ripened slowly (for up to 18 months). It's produced all year round, and the quality can vary seasonally as well as by year. Grana can be shaved on pasta but is best enjoyed alone, in small wedges, or with fresh fruit. Grana Padano's sweet flavor and buttery aroma only improve with time, so always try to preserve its freshness.

The production of cured meats is also important, and although most people know and cherish Prosciutto di Parma, the North is home of Prosciutto di San Daniele. This cured meat that has been made in Friuli Venezia-Giulia for centuries, and is prized for its pink meat, creamy, smooth texture, and salty-sweet flavor. Prosciutto di San Daniele is delicious when served raw on country bread with a soft, sweet cows' milk cheese like Taleggio. Cooking it will alter its delicate flavor. Prosciutto di San Daniele is cured in the same fashion as Prosciutto di Parma, Prosciutto di Carpegna, and the Tuscan Prosciutto Crudo: It must be aged for at least 12 months, but some are aged for up to two years.

Genovese basil is loved worldwide for making delicious pesto. It has a small-to-medium-sized leaf which is oval in shape, convex, and light green in color. It gives off a delicate scent; there is no trace of the mint, which can be detected in other varieties. Trentino's Val di Non apples are simply delicious. They're crisp, juicy, and rich with vitamins--the ideal fruit for those aspiring to a healthy diet.

All DOP products are labeled, so, when you are out grocery shopping, make sure that what you are buying is the real deal!

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