



The World of Blue Cheeses

By George Geary CCP

All over the world you can find a cheese that is part of the “blue” cheese family. Some are very strong, yet few are mild. Here is a list of a few cheeses and the characteristics

France: Roquefort Flavor~ Strong

History: Roquefort's history can be traced back to the Romans. According to legend, a shepherd, out with his flock near the Combalou Cave, was in a hurry to meet with his shepherdess girlfriend. In his haste, he accidentally dropped a piece of bread, spread with sheep's milk curd, in the cave. On his return to the cave several weeks later, he found his piece of bread, which was now covered in a white and blue paste. He tasted it, liked it, and... Roquefort cheese was invented. It is the oldest form of cheese, also known as the "Cheese of Kings"

Roquefort can only be matured only in specially adapted cellars, built in the prehistoric caves around Mont Combalou, which lies close to the village of Roquefort. These cellars are ventilated by natural a funnel, called “fleurines”, which maintain an ambient temperature of 7° to 8°C, and propagate the *Penicillium Roqueforti*, a fungus, which covers the walls. These caves and corridors form a gigantic natural chemico-biological filter and can cover between 4 and 11 levels.

English: Stilton Flavor ~Medium to Strong

Long known as “The King of Cheeses”, blue Stilton is one a handful of British cheeses granted the status of a “protected designation origin” (PDO) by the European Commission. Only cheese produced in the three counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire and made according to a strict code may be called Stilton. There are just six dairies licensed to make Stilton. They are subject to regular audit by an independent inspection agency accredited to European Standard EN 45011.

To be called Stilton, each cheese must:

- be made only in the three counties from local milk which is pasteurized before use
- be made only in a traditional cylindrical shape
- be allowed to form its own crust or coat
- be un-pressed
- have delicate blue veins radiating from the center
- have a taste profile typical of Stilton.

History: Stilton is still made in much the same way as it was when Daniel Defoe, writing in his "Tour through England & Wales" in 1727, remarked that he "...passed through Stilton, a town famous for cheese". And yet, Stilton was never made in the town of Stilton!

Stilton is situated about 80 miles north of London on the old Great North Road. In the 18th century, the town was a staging post for coaches traveling from London to York. Horses would be changed, and travelers served light refreshments at one of the hostelries in the town. Cooper Thornhill, an East Midlands entrepreneur, was landlord at the famous Bell Inn and it was he who introduced these travelers to a soft, creamy, blue veined cheese, which subsequently took its name from the town. Thornhill had brought the cheese from a farmer's wife by the name of Frances Pawlett who lived near Melton Mowbray.

Italy: Gorgonzola Flavor ~ Mild

History: Gorgonzola has very old origins, although, like many other traditional food products, it has no official birth certificate but many hypothetical and legendary ones.

Some claim that Gorgonzola was first made in the town of the same name situated just outside Milan, in the year of grace 879. Others, instead, believe that it was born in the important dairy center of Pasturo, in the Valsassina, where the natural caves, with an average temperature ranging from 6 to 12 °C, represented the perfect conditions for the maturing of gorgonzola as well as several other cheeses.

Gorgonzola was originally known as "stracchino di Gorgonzola" (Gorgonzola's stracchino) and later with its more descriptive synonym "stracchino verde" (green stracchino). It is therefore apparent that it was produced in the autumn, using the milk of the "tired" cows returning from the mountain pastures (the name "stracchino" derives from "stracco", meaning "tired"), and had clear similarities with the other cheeses obtained from the various penicillium fungi throughout the Alpine region. In any case, the village of Gorgonzola remained for centuries the most renowned area of production, although not necessarily the largest producer or trader.

Although not as rapidly as other cheeses, Gorgonzola's popularity spread constantly, at least in the area across Lombardy and Piedmont. The provinces of Pavia and Novara became, together with Milan and Como, large producers of this cheese, forming the embryo of that area which, a century later, the 1955 and 1977 Italian decree laws would declare as the official region for the production and maturing of gorgonzola, by then protected by the designation of origin.

From the beginning of the 20th century, Gorgonzola enjoyed an increasing success, especially abroad, setting a record in exports, with over 100 thousand quintals of cheese per year delivered to England, France and Germany. While

the first country preferred the white Gorgonzola, with its delicate and slightly piquant flavor, the French and the Germans expressly requested the so-called "two-curd" Gorgonzola, with its veined appearance and strong flavor.

In the period immediately after the world war, producers developed the new "one-curd" processing technique. Gradually, the new production method replaced the old one, which was based mainly on empirical formulas, was remarkably more expensive and gave no certain results in terms of hygiene and quality.

The cheese's unexpected success led to a large number of imitation attempts on the part of countries such as Austria, Germany, Poland and even France: more or less piquant molded cheeses could be found on all tables.

Gorgonzola's producers became preoccupied with the need to protect their product. In the 50s Italian law No. 125/1954 was issued to regulate original and typical products, and the deriving decree law assigned to gorgonzola, like parmesan, Roman pecorino and other Italian and foreign cheeses, the right to the controlled designation of origin.

In 1970, the Consorzio di Tutela (Protection Consortium) was founded.

American Blue Cheese Flavor" Mild to Strong
Maytag Blue Newton Iowa

History: Blue cheese of cylindrical shape made from cow's milk. It has been produced since 1920's when the Maytag's founded their family farm producing cheeses. This cheese is not produced in huge volumes, as the cheese makers want to keep the tradition of hand-made cheese and offer only best quality cheese to the customer. Maytag Blue has a crumbly texture and it reveals a very spicy flavor. The period of curing and maturing takes six months. Other cheeses from the production of Maytag Dairy Farm include White Cheddar and Edam. This cheese is used as a table cheese for dressings and salads.

Cowgirl Creamery California Cashel Blue
Generations of the Grubb family have been millers and butter makers in Tipperary, Ireland. In the mid 1980s, Louis and Jane Grubb became the first makers of Irish farm blue cheese. Aged about 6 months, the cheese is creamy and salty with a clean, blue tang. Made from pasteurized cow's milk, the cheese is inoculated with P. Roquefort and uses vegetarian rennet. The 3 lb. wheels are wrapped in gold foil and sold either as whole wheels or individually foil-wrapped quarters. <http://www.cowgirlcreamery.com>

Point Reyes Cheeses California

Bob Giacomini has been in the dairy business since 1959. In August 2000, he and his family, wife Dean and daughters Karen, Diana, Lynn, and Jill, realized their longtime dream of producing a farmstead cheese they could sell to the public. The term farmstead refers to a product that is made exclusively from

ingredients grown or derived from the farm where the product is produced. Thus, all of the milk used in the Giacomini's cheese comes from their herd of Holstein cattle. The flavor of milk changes with the seasons, depending upon what type of grasses the cattle are eating, and by using milk exclusively from their own herd, the Giacomini's are afforded the strictest possible quality control over the final product.

Bob and his daughters work with cheese maker Monty McIntyre to produce Pt. Reyes Original Blue at the family's dairy in Pt. Reyes. The cheese is the only farmstead blue cheese produced in California. Says Bob, "We did a lot of research to decide what kind of cheese we wanted to do. Everyone has their own niche, and we came to the realization that there weren't any good table farmstead blues being produced in the state."

The cheese, which placed second in the Blue category of the Wisconsin Cheese Association's World Cheese Contest this year, is made with a traditional penicillin mold powder. The powder is added to the milk before the curd is formed. Once the curd has set, it is placed in hoop molds overnight to drain the whey, or liquid protein. The cheese is then salted and "punched," meaning small holes are pricked into it to allow it to oxygenate so the mold can grow.

The curing process comes next, with the cheese being held for three weeks at high humidity to encourage mold growth. Finally, the cheese is moved to a 40°F cooler to age for five to six months. By the time Original Blue hits the retail shelves, it will have aged at least seven months and have achieved a mellow, pungent tang tempered by an exquisite creaminess. "We feel very fortunate, living in the area that we do," says Bob. "People in the Bay Area appreciate farm fresh products and are willing to spend the extra dollar to get them. Our cheese has been very well-received, and we're happy.... we've found our niche."

Pt. Reyes Original Blue is available at the Berkeley, Marin and San Francisco Ferry Plaza farmers' markets, by mail order at www.pointreyescheese.com , or call 800-591-6878, or at specialty food stores throughout the Bay Area (including Tomales Bay Foods and Artisan Cheese).