

# The Art of Eating Magazine

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*Photograph courtesy of Latteria di Cameri.*

CHEESE ANTHOLOGY

## Gorgonzola

| By Edward Behr

**appellation:** Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP)

**place:** Piedmont and Lombardy, northern Italy

**milk:** cow (none specified, in practice predominantly Frisona Italiana breed), pasteurized

**type:** very soft to semi-soft, pressed, blue

**size:** a drum 20 to 32 cm (about 7 to 13 in) in diameter and at least 13 cm (about 5 in) high, weighing 10 to 13 kg for the *grande* (made only in *dolce*), 9 to 12 kg for the *media* (made only in *piccante*), and 6 to 8 kg for the *piccola* (made only in *piccante*)

**production:** 30 dairy plants, using milk from some 1,500 farms, a growing total of more than 60,000 metric tonnes each year

**related cheeses:** for Gorgonzola *dolce*, none; for Gorgonzola *piccante*, Bleu de Bresse, Bleu d’Auvergne, Devon Blue, Cashel Blue, Spa Blue

**look for:** a seller who knows and cares about Gorgonzola; an orangy-pink crust, if you can see beneath the foil; green to blue and not gray mold, in balance with the white (names to look for include Arrigoni, Baruffaldi, Latteria Sociale di Cameri, Angelo Croce, Guffanti) — if you taste, beware dirty or extraneous flavors, lack of distinct “blue” taste, plastic-y texture, and, in export, cheese that’s past peak

**taste:** Both Gorgonzola *dolce* and *piccante* have a sense of richness with sometimes a buttery texture. Good examples have clear blue character with a little, or more than a little, pungency and underlying nuttiness. The most ingratiating *dolce* has an earthy funk and an utter lushness with meltingly creamy spots. The *piccante*, with its greater firmness, has more piquancy, depth, and blue-cheese savoriness.

**drinks:** Sweet, still Moscato wine goes with either version. More recent ideas, whose success depends on the particular examples, are rich dark Belgian beer (including one with licorice component and a Christmas version with some sweetness), gueuze, Madeira, and dry Marsala.

The creamiest Gorgonzola *dolce* can be extremely earthy and sensual, especially as it warms to room temperature, while the best *piccante* is highly savory and piquant. But for all its fame and frequent deliciousness, some Gorgonzola is disappointing, maybe more often when exported to North America. The cheese can be slick and lacking dimension (all too “perfect”), or it may have defects. A smaller concern is that the milk is required to be pasteurized.

Together with Crescenzo, Taleggio, and a few others, Gorgonzola is one of the cheeses called *stracchino*, which share a long-ago origin in a season and place. *Stracco* in Lombard dialect means “tired.” When the cows returned on foot to their homes in the plains, after spending the summer in the mountains above Bergamo and Como, the first pastures they came to for about 30 kilometers were around the town of Gorgonzola, northeast of Milan (according to the description of Fedele Massara, writing in the *Giornale di Agricoltura* in 1867). The weary herds all in one place created an enormous volume of milk to be transformed into cheese, and the cheeses were called *stracchini*. Gorgonzola was made only during the second half of September and in October, benefitting from the coolness and humidity. Curd was set after each milking, and the curds from two subsequent milkings were layered in the molds, the earlier, cooler, drier curd alternating with the fresh, warm one, so as to leave openings, where the blue mold appeared. That was Gorgonzola *a due paste* — “with two curds.” The cultures and molds were wild. Like nearly all blue cheese, Gorgonzola *a due paste* during

the 20th century came to be pierced with needles to let in more air and encourage the mold. The needling of Gorgonzola continues, but there's no layering and no wild molds; laboratory cultures are added from the start.

For at least two centuries, the quantity of Gorgonzola has been increasing, and production long ago spread into Piedmont. The nine provinces of the original 1954 zone are now 16, and although there are many fewer producers than there once were, 30 dairy plants together produce over five million cheeses per year. The move to larger scale may explain the switch to pasteurized milk.

Since 1996, the rules have required it. That blank slate of microorganism-free raw material allows more control and consistency, but pasteurization doesn't make Gorgonzola safer — aged cheese tends to be safe by nature — and having some superior raw-milk Gorgonzola could enhance the image of all Gorgonzola. (In 1989, the organization of Stilton producers began to require the use of pasteurized milk; its intransigence on the subject led finally to the creation of the raw-milk cheese Stichelton, which became more sought after by informed consumers than Stilton is.) When Giovanni Delforno wrote *I Formaggi Tipici del Piemonte e della Valle d'Aosta*, published in 1981, he devoted a quarter of the book to Gorgonzola (even if the cheese originated in Lombardy). Some of the cheeses then were still made with raw milk, and, he said, the two kinds “obviously have different organoleptic and structural characteristics.” Pasteurized-milk Gorgonzola had “a sweeter and attenuated aroma,” while the raw-milk cheeses were “more fragrant and flavorful.” Maybe the best makers are more skilled now at pasteurization and using pasteurized milk, and differences are less.

Of the two versions of Gorgonzola, *piccante* is closer in taste to the original — firmer, more aged, spicier — and experienced tasters consider it more complex and interesting. (According to a 2000 study by scientists at the University of Naples, it contains a slightly larger number of aromatic compounds.) Gorgonzola *dolce*, sometimes called *cremoso*, is younger, less blue, moister, sometimes spoonable and flowing. It's more popular — more fun.

The differences between the two come from differences nearly throughout the process. The temperature of the milk, when curd is set, is higher for the *piccante* (36 versus 31 degrees C), so the curd shrinks more and becomes drier, and then it's cut in smaller pieces, which lose more moisture. The strain of *Penicillium roqueforti* added to the *piccante* is chosen partly for its darker color; the strain for the *dolce* is chosen for its ability to produce creaminess. The salting of the *piccante* lasts a week and of the *dolce* just three days. During aging, both kinds are needled, brushed with brine, banded, and turned in a temperature of 3 to 4 degrees C (37 to 39 degrees F). Most producers age their own cheese, and there are another ten affineurs besides. Three affineurs still age in caves excavated into rock, but most aging takes place in wholly modern facilities.

The **Latteria Sociale di Cameri** uses more traditional, artisanal ways, and its Gorgonzola wins awards. Gianpiero Mellone, the director, explains that each producer has its variations in the process. Cameri's cheeses are bound around the sides by poplar slats and aged on spruce shelves. The combination of wood and rubbing with brine develops the traditional pink-orange microflora that give a significant part of the traditional character. (The plastic shelves and slats of industrial production result in a gray rind. The original legal description of Gorgonzola in 1954 read, “Rough, reddish crust,” while the current law says, “gray and/or pink crust, nonedible.”)

The cheeses remain bound in their slats, which keep them from bulging and help to hold in moisture, until they're ready to be shipped. Only then are they wrapped in foil. In contrast, most French blues, led by Roquefort, are sealed in foil early in their aging to cut off the supply of oxygen and stop the growth of mold; the cheeses can't form a rind. Gorgonzola, like Stilton, is a blue with a natural rind.

Gorgonzola *dolce* is milder partly because it's aged for less time. The minimum is 50 days, but it becomes really creamy and flavorful only at 80 to 90 days. The minimum for *piccante* is 80 days, but the time can reach 120 to 150 days, or even longer for a special *riserva*.●