

Richmond Hill cafe & larder

CHEESE NOTES

Taleggio

Lombardy, Italy

A ripe Taleggio should have a dry uncracked rind, and be orange and grey in colour, occasionally dotted with tiny spots of blue penicillium. The texture will be soft and bulging, perhaps with a little cheese oozing from just beneath the rind. It will smell of moulds, but above all yeasts. Creamy and rich on the palate there is an unmistakable hint of cured meats. Unlike many washed rind cheeses, the thin chewy rind should be eaten to best appreciate the special flavours retained by cave maturation.

Enjoy it at its simple best with crusty bread, and a glass of red, or if you have the chance it is well worth exploring other combinations. It makes a great match with a glass of sparkling and is even better with a real beer. Cooked Taleggio is another dimension altogether. Apart from melting at a low temperature it releases a most distinct aromatic smell that is greatly enhanced by the addition of freshly cracked pepper.

It was only in the early 1900's that the name Taleggio was developed by cheese makers to differentiate their cheese from others. Taking its name from Val Taleggio where most of the milk in the region is produced, the name is in fact more closely associated with another valley, the Valsassina. Here, natural granite caves honeycomb the slopes whose natural fissures are an open invitation to the mould laden air of the surrounding forests. The name Taleggio is protected under Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) and every cheese must be imprinted with four joined circles embossed in the rind.

What clearly identifies a good Taleggio from all other imitations is how it has been matured. Less than a quarter of all the cheeses made under the name are matured in the traditional way - in the natural caves of Valsassina - and that is what makes the difference. Mauri is the only company in Italy still producing cave ripened Taleggio. The caves used by Mauri to mature Taleggio vary in one important respect, the natural way they are cooled by snow all year. Cut deep into the mountainside just below the snowline, it is the melting snow that trickles down through the cracks and crevices of the granite walls, which cools the caves below to a constant 5-6 degrees centigrade. Small puddles of moisture create permanent humidity, which is important for the moulds to grow well. When combined with the environment of the Alps the caves contain a unique and very diverse natural microclimate that has developed over thousands of years, and has never been successfully replicated by modern refrigeration.