

Taleggio Cheese

I am often asked what my favorite cheese is and find this a tough choice to make.

However, I think that Taleggio is one of my top favorites and one of the great gifts to us from Italy.



This is a cheese for which I have been



researching and refining my process over the past several years.

This is truly one of my all time favorites and, by the way it disappears so fast from my cheese boards here, it is also a big favorite of my friends!

So, as our gift to you this holiday season, I give you more information than you probably ever wanted to know about this fabulous cheese called Taleggio.

Happy Cheese Making!



What's not to like about these gems!

In the mountains of northern Italy, tucked into the area between the famous lakes, just north of the modern industrial area of the Padano (Po River Valley) near Bergamo, lies a remote area still working with their traditional agriculture.



This is the Val Taleggio, where only recently, modern roads have made things more accessible. These old traditions only exist in modern times due to the difficulty in accessing this high mountain valley and the fact that the government and people of Italy have developed

a new respect for these "Old Ways."
The people support this and the government assists.



One of the great contributions from this region has been the cheese 'Taleggio'

A Bit of History:

The story of this cheese begins in the high mountain valley for which the cheese has been named, Val Taleggio. It is located in the Bergamo province of Lombardia, just east of Milan and north of Bergamo. This has been produced since the 9th century, although some people do claim the existence of this cheese goes as far back as the Roman presence in these mountains.



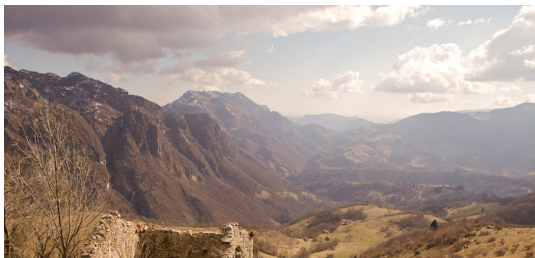
This cheese was first documented in 1200, when it was called 'Stracchino', meaning a tired cheese. The origin of the name 'Stracchino' relates to the Lombard dialect word 'stracch', which means tired or exhausted. It relates to the condition of the herd upon finally reaching the plain after their long stay on the Alpine pastures. The cows, although worn out by the long journey, were still able to produce milk fit for making cheese, and this cheese they called 'Stracchino'.

It is here that the tradition of 'Bergamini' (of Bergamo) was started - typical characters of the high meadows such as herdsmen, breeders and keepers of the traditional cheese processing rules have been handed down over the generations. They were experts in turning the milk produced in the summer alpine pastures directly into Taleggio, a soft cheese made with whole cows milk, that has a sweet and delicate taste with aromatic hints.

It is important to note that the cheese of the past, made on the higher Alpine pastures, needed to be larger, drier, and longer aged cheese to preserve them due to the rigors of the long and rough trip that would take several days into the more populated valley where the markets were. This would have precluded the production of this cheese, except in small quantities in these high pastures.

This Taleggio reference was originally due more to the high mountain town being the point from which the herds traveled to and from at the beginning and end of the summer months, rather than the place it was made in large quantities. During their journey, they needed to be milked and the inhabitants of this valley began to produce cheese that, once matured in "caves" or at their farms, could be exchanged for other products or commercialized.

The most accessible of these lower valleys was Valsassina, near Lake Como. The important track to





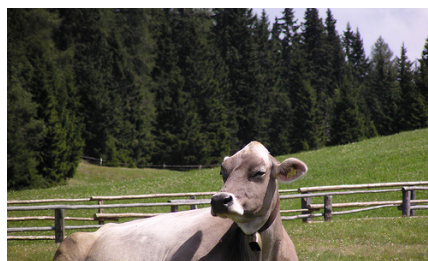
Valsassina was through a very steep gorge that included many 'Casere', which are natural caves cut by gorges that feed in air at the constant temperature of between 37 and 46°F, with a humidity of 85-90%. This is perfectly suited for the aging of these cheeses.



As time moved forward, the access to and from these high pastures improved with better roads, and the popularity of soft cheese increased. The cheese began to be made more on the high meadows closer to the grazing animals, and then transported to the caves and markets of Valsassina. It was, and still is, considered that these Taleggio from the mountains were the richest and the best.



Today, the cheese is still made, much as it has been for hundreds of years, on the high pastures. The process and skills are still handed down from the elders to the young.





*Traditionally, the best herds adapted for the region have been the 'Bruno Alpina' similar, if not the same, as the Brown Swiss.
The true key to maintaining these old ways is in passing the torch to the younger generations.*

As the industrialization of the Po River Valley progressed during the late 19th and 20th centuries, many of the larger producers began producing on a much larger scale over a broader area in the lowlands of this region, and the pasteurization of the milk became accepted on the larger scale as well. However, many of these cheeses were still transported to the special caves in Valsassina, for the proper aging character.

The current name of 'Taleggio' for this cheese has only been used since the early 1900's and until that time was simply called 'Stracchino'.

What is Taleggio Cheese?

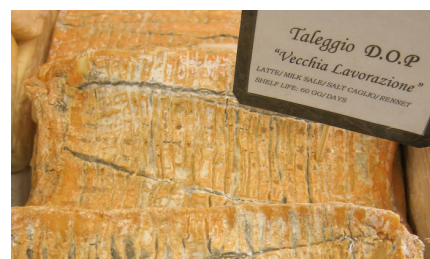
Taleggio is a semi-soft, washed-rind cheese, made both commercially in the valleys and on small mountain farms. The washed rind is thin and moist and the color vary from rose to orange. As it ages, it may develop a layer of white and grey mold, all very edible and adding to the character. It is quite aromatic, yet mild in flavor, and features some tangy, meaty flavors with a fruity finish. The texture of the cheese is moist-to-oozy, with a very pleasant melt-in-the-mouth feel. The combination of the soft texture, pungent aroma, and buttery flavors has proven to be a winner, especially when spread on fresh crusty bread. Traditionally, it is formed in a square mold of 7-8 inches and 2-3 inches high.

Variations in Style

- Today, Taleggio is **largely made on a grand scale** in the valley of the Po River from higher production breeds and pasteurized milk.
- **Raw milk versions can still be found produced in the mountains on summer pastures.** I find that many of these cheeses made in high mountain pastures from raw milk are using the name 'Stracchino' again. Sometimes they are also called 'All Antica' meaning 'old ways.' These can be much more complex in flavor.



- A **fresher, younger, unripened version** of this cheese can be found in this area as 'Robiola', and should not to be confused with the softer version of the same name found in the Langhe area of Piemonte, south of Torino. These cheeses have a more acid, fresh flavor and less ripened body. Little to no color has developed on the surface.
- I have also seen several **'Stravecchio' versions or extra-aged** and brine washed with much more complex flavor, a dry crust and firm paste.





A Recipe for Making Taleggio at Home

This recipe will be for a single cheese using pasteurized whole milk and our Taleggio mold. The recipe can be modified by changing milk and additions proportionately for larger or smaller cheese.

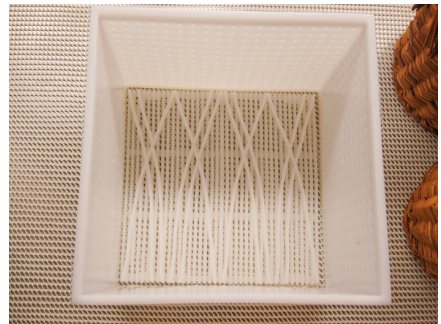
If using raw milk for this cheese, reduce the cultured yogurt addition by about 30-40%.

Full cream cow milk is heated to a temperature of 30-36°C (86-96°F). A lactic starter culture is added to cause the milk to acidify, followed by calf rennet which causes the milk to coagulate and produce the curds. These curds are then broken and placed into square molds, which are then put into special warm rooms with high humidity, for 18 hours. This operation is very important, since it is in this phase that a fermentation takes place, and it is this which produces the springy texture of Taleggio. The final key to success for this is the proper aging and washing of the rind as detailed below.

Before you begin:

You will need:

- 2.5 gallons of whole milk (not ultra-pasteurized) and a stainless steel pot large enough to hold this
- Ricki's **Yogurt-Y1** culture made up as yogurt (*Yes! A mother culture*) and then using 1% of this yogurt related to milk volume or **3.2 oz. for 2.5** gallons of milk
- Also some **B.linens** for the surface wash during the cave washing stage
- Liquid **rennet**, 2 ml or slightly less than 1/2 tsp
- **Cheese salt** or **brine**
- A good **thermometer**
- A knife to cut the curds, and a spoon or **ladle** to stir the curds
- 1 **Taleggio Mold** from our website which is the mold specifically made for this cheese. This mold will come with a special draining mat of its own. If you do not have this mold, a round mold about 8" in diameter with open bottom will also work with a draining mat to place beneath it
- **Another draining mat** to support the aging cheese.
- **No cheese press or weights** are needed for this cheese.
- A covered plastic box large enough to accommodate the aging cheese- 12x12 or larger
- **Calcium chloride** if using pasteurized milk



Everything needs to be clean and **sanitized**.

Acidifying and heating the milk:

Begin by heating the milk to **93°F**. You do this by placing the milk in a pot or sink of very warm water. If you do this in a pot on the stove, make sure you heat the milk slowly and stir it well as it heats.

About 1/2 tsp of calcium chloride can be added to the milk if using pasteurized milk or having a problem with a firm curd.





Pictured above is the milk coming in to be heated. Note the differential of the 2 thermometers in the photo above. Because of my water bath and milk volume being similar, I can heat the water bath the same number of degrees above my target temp as the current milk temp is below that temp, walk away and come back in 15 minutes with the milk at my target temperature.

Once the milk is at 93F, the **3.2 oz. of yogurt culture can be added**. The yogurt needs to be well stirred to eliminate large lumps so that it can mix into the milk evenly. **If using raw milk** for this cheese, reduce the cultured yogurt addition by about 30-40%.

Also, **add about 1/16tsp of the B. linens** culture, which will become active during the aging stage.

Allow the milk to ripen at the target temperature for 30 min. (less time needed because this is a live working culture and not a frozen culture).

Coagulation with rennet:

Then add about **2 ml of single strength liquid rennet or slightly less than 1/2 teaspoon**.

The milk now needs to **sit quietly for 30 minutes** while the culture works and the rennet coagulates the curd. The thermal mass of this milk should keep it warm during this period. The milk should not cool during this time.

While you are waiting, sanitize and prepare the mold, draining mats, and draining area for the curds.



Cutting curds and releasing the whey:

Cut the curd first into large 1.5" squares with a knife and then allow to rest for 5 minutes, during which the whey will rise. Next, you will break this down into 1/2-3/4 inch pieces over 10-15

minutes, using your ladle or a whisk with widely spaced thin wires.





Keeping the original temperature as close as possible, the curds then need to be stirred for another 15-25 minutes. This needs to be done gently to avoid breaking the curds further. The objective here is to keep the curds large enough to retain some moisture, but remove enough whey for a proper aging.



Remove the whey and transfer to mold:

The mold(s) should be laid down with the draining mat, another draining mat beneath that and preferably a solid board beneath it all to make the flipping easier.



Here, I have made a larger batch to include a couple of smaller cheeses (always great to take whole small wheels to gatherings). This was a 4 gallon batch. Note that the smaller basket molds do have bottoms but they are very open and do not constrain the drainage at all. These are small enough that they can easily be flipped by hand after about 20 -30 minutes.

When the curds are ready, they can be allowed to settle under the whey. Then, remove 1/3 of the whey from the curds.

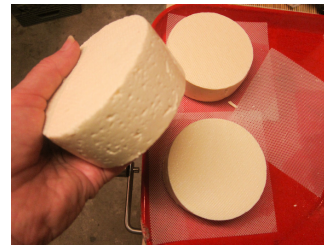


The curds can now be transferred directly using a spoon or ladle to the mold that was previously readied.





Over the many trials I have done for making Taleggio, I have used a variety of molds that have worked well:



The Camembert or small 2 lb. molds will work.



Also, these small 5" square open bottomed molds that hold about the same as the Camembert molds will work.

Note the surface development on these as they ripen.



I also use a larger 8" mold with no bottom that is my Gorgonzola mold.

These all work fine, but not as well as the actual Taleggio molds used above, because they have fewer drainage holes that do not allow for the full drainage of this cheese.

Ripening in the mold:

No pressing is required for this cheese. Instead, the curd mass is **turned initially at 30 minutes** and then several times over the next several hours. This will allow the surface to consolidate and the curds to pack tighter under their own weight as they continue to acidify and drain. The curd will consolidate with its own weight during this time.



The curds will begin to settle in their molds and consolidate. Within 30 minutes they are ready for the first turn. Be careful because they are still quite soft!

The cheese does **need to be kept warm for the initial ripening at 75-80F for the first 4-5 hrs** (I use pans of warm water surrounding the cheese and an insulated pad on top for this) and then the temperature can be allowed to drop to room temperature overnight.



Notice the many holes in the Taleggio mold to encourage drainage, as well as the pans of warm water to keep the cheese warm for ripening and encourage the bacteria to work.

It should remain in its form during this time. The final ripening should take 16-18 hours from molding.

Salting:

The final cheese should now weigh about 4 lbs. when using 2.5 gallons of milk.

You should have a saturated brine prepared for salting this cheese.

You will find all of the details you need on brining [here](#).

A simple brine formula is:

1 gallon of water to which is added 2.25 lbs of salt, 1tbs. calcium chloride (30% solution), and 1 tsp. white vinegar.

The cheese now needs to be **set in the brine for about 1.5-1.75 hours per pound.**

The cheese will float above the brine surface, so sprinkle another teaspoon or two of salt on the top surface of the cheese. Flip the cheese and re-salt the surface about half way through the brine period.

At the end of the brine bath, allow the cheese to surface dry for a day or so before moving it to the cool high moisture aging area.



This cheese **can also be dry salted by** weighing out about 2% of salt by cheese weight and applying over 3-4 days, allowing each salting to be absorbed before adding the next. This is actually the more traditional method.

The final salted cheese needs to be dried down to a matte surface that is still damp or tacky to the touch. It should not be dry enough to begin darkening.

You are now ready for the tricky part in aging.

Aging:

Proper ripening is the KEY to making a great Taleggio cheese. It's reputation has been made partially due to the special caves in the region of Valsassina.

Your best effort would be to try to emulate this cool, damp, and airy condition the best you can.

Your aging space should best be kept at 46-52F and 80-85% moisture. This is cooler than other cheeses, but will allow the ripening to unfold over a longer time and more evenly ripen the interior of the cheese. The cheese will ripen from the edges to center due to the molds that develop through the washing over the next several weeks.

Using a plastic box with a cover should hold the moisture. I also include a board at the bottom of this that will act as a moisture reservoir. Opening and turning the cheese once a day will allow sufficient air exchange. I also use a cloth damp with brine to keep the surface moist.



*The cheese above is ready to be covered and moved to the aging space.
It needs to be turned at least once every day.*

Details for the rind development:

NOTE: The following schedule may need to be shortened or extended by a day or so, and will depend on the progress of the cheese. This is where taking GOOD NOTES will help you in the future.

About 4 days after the initial salting:

The cheese will begin to mellow as the salt works its way to the center. It may also have given off more moisture and the mats and boards should be changed if wet. Sometimes a cloth may be needed under the cheese during this time to wick this moisture away.

The cheese may seem a bit greasy at this point, this is the initial yeast doing their work to prepare for the growth of the B.linens and other molds that may appear.

At day 5:

Prepare a light brine with 1 tbs. of salt in a cup of chlorine free water. Stir the salt in well and then add 1/16 tsp of the B.linens (Yes .. again!). Set this in your aging space (at the same temp as the aging Taleggio) to be used on day 6.

At day 6:

The cheese should now show a heavier growth of slime (yeast, etc.) and also have become very slippery/greasy. It is time to remove this layer.

Using the light brine you prepared on day 5, soak a cloth and use it to **wipe the greasy surface off**. Dry the cheese on a board for just long enough for the wash to be absorbed by the surface, and then place it back in the aging space. Discard the wash.

At day 8-9:

Prepare a **new wash** as before but without the b.linens culture.

Repeat the above if the surface is still greasy.

Otherwise, just use the cloth and wipe the top and sides with the wash but do not dry down, return to the aging box wet side up. In 6-8 hrs flip the cheese and repeat and return to aging space when done.

Now you are well on the way to developing the washed rind. It will be a collection of natural yeast and mold that settled on the surface. This surface, if developed soon and well, will develop and produce enzymes that cause the proteins to change gradually from the edge to the center. It will also compete



against blues and other molds initially. This process will be doing the magic you want on the protein transformation and the cheese will become much sweeter as it ages.

You can now repeat the last step every 3-5 days, as you see other molds trying to grow on the surface. The objective is to maintain a damp, but not wet, surface while the desired molds do their work. You will notice that the surface becomes more and more rosy/orange as the days pass. Maintaining the surface is critical and the cooler aging temp will be your friend for this. You will also find that the cheese becomes much softer and springy as it ages here.

The cheese can now be aged for 4-6 weeks, when it will be ready for your table. You will need to be the judge on this since its your cheese and you know what you want.



Fresh Taleggio cheese, made on the mountain in Val Taleggio, ready for aging.

Here is a fabulous DVD that will give you a bit more insight into the process of making and aging the Taleggio cheese.

It also features Gorgonzola and many other cheeses. If you have not seen these DVDs by Will Stud from Australia, they are quite inspirational in showing the places, people and process of making cheese.

This might be a good time to drop hints to others that you would like to get the DVD or the Taleggio mold for the Holidays.
Hint .. Hint! ..Poke! ..Whisper!

