

Richmond Hill café & larder

CHEESE NOTES

Gorgonzola Piccante

Cow's milk, blue
Lombardy, Italy

It may be a fairy tale, but legend has it that a cheese that has been around for over 1000 years was originally made using the milk of 'tired' cows because this made the best formaggio nato dall' amore - literally 'cheese born from love'. In medieval times it was common in the Italian Alps to graze herds of cows in the mountain pastures during the summer. As winter approached the cows were driven South down from the lush valleys that lay above the snow line and rested overnight at points along the route. One of these resting places was the village of Gorgonzola some 10 kilometres outside Milan. Apart from the long and tiring walk down the mountain, the cows were also at the end of their seasonal lactation cycle and the quantity of milk they provided in one milking was insufficient to make a vat of cheese. After the evening milking fresh curds were made and then hung in bags to dry overnight. It was not until the following day that they were mixed back into curds made with the next morning's milk. The method used to make these fresh cheeses was typical of those made in the region and were commonly known as Stracchino, from the Lombardy dialect word stracco, meaning tired.

The cows may have been tired but the returning herdsmen apparently were not. Making cheese was a woman's work in those days and after months in the mountains the return of the herdsmen was a welcome distraction. Legend has it that cheese left in the cool damp cellars of the local pub in Gorgonzola was forgotten one day in the seasonal festivities. The tradition of mixing two days curds meant the cheese had an uneven texture and as a result of hanging overnight in the cellar the evening curd had also been impregnated with mould spores. As the forgotten cheeses cured in the cellar the moulds developed through the open fissures in the cheese, marbling them with blue veins and developing a strong piquant taste. When the cheese was finally remembered a few weeks later it was found to taste delicious, and so by happy accident the legend of Stracchino di Gorgonzola was born.

These days Gorgonzola is only legally made with the milk collected from the Lombardy region and is protected from being copied by DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata). The cheeses are made in a traditional 12kg drums by over 80 dairies in a consortium scattered across the surrounding countryside, and most cheese is then stored for maturation at a giant underground cellar complex based at Novara, an hour's drive from Milan. On arrival here the fresh young cheeses are put into warm and humid curing rooms after they have been individually rolled in sea salt and carefully ringed with a lattice of wooden slats. At first glance it appears these traditional wooden slats create a lot of extra work. But they are necessary, not only to provide support for the young soft cheese, but also to draw out moisture from the curd, encouraging the formation of a unique yeasty rind which slowly becomes covered with powdery patches of grey mould

After three weeks the whole cheeses are spiked systematically to encourage development of internal blue green moulds. Wood again plays a vital role in maintaining the unique environment of these maturation rooms, and only salt encrusted wooden shelving is used to support the rows and rows of cheeses stored in the underground complex. Temperature, timing and traditional techniques differ slightly in each company, particularly at the maturation stage which requires between two to three months. Just to confuse matters there are actually two distinct types of Gorgonzola known as Gorgonzola Dolce and Gorgonzola Piccante available in Australia. They have very different texture and flavour characteristics because of the way the curds are handled.

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Gorgonzola Dolce, or 'sweet' *Gorgonzola*, is a modern version of the original and uses the hand ladled curd of just one single milking. It has grown to become the most popular of the two since being launched during the 1940's, following technological advances in starter cultures. Creamy rich and luscious in texture, this soft version of the cheese has a mild slightly sweet blue flavour when young, which slowly breaks down to sticky blue goo as it matures. It becomes very strong, and quite sour if kept too long, and whilst *Dolce* cheese is easy to like it often deteriorates on the long voyage to Australia unless very carefully handled.

Gorgonzola Piccante is still made following the old traditional time consuming methods including the mixing of curds collected from two separate milkings. Recognised by connoisseurs as a more sophisticated cheese it is quite firm and condensed in texture with dark steely blue mould lines and a pronounced spicy full mould flavour. Sometimes known as mountain *Gorgonzola* after the caves it was once matured in, the quality of this cheese changes according to season. But not surprisingly the very best of these cheeses are still made during autumn, when the cows are tired.