

Sheep-y means tangy and satisfying

Calabria, the southernmost region of mainland Italy, produces some excellent sheep's milk cheeses, but they are rarely seen here. I know this firsthand — I visited Calabria twice in recent years and found excellent pecorino on antipasto platters at every restaurant I tried.

So when I recently spotted a cheese labeled "Pecorino Calabrese Classico" at Sunshine Foods in St. Helena, I took it home with anticipation. The wedge was just under 3 inches high with a light dusting of powdery white mold on its thin rind. The interior was ivory in color, with a few tiny eyes, and it glistened at room temperature, as high-fat sheep's milk cheeses tend to do.

The aroma offered that unmistakable lanolin or lamb's-wool scent characteristic of aged sheep's milk cheeses, a fragrance that some people can't abide. I find it appetizing because it signals what is to come: a robust, meaty flavor, with plentiful salt and a lactic tang in the finish. Moist and seemingly younger than most of the pecorinos imported from Sardinia and Sicily, the cheese nevertheless had persistent flavor and personality.

Franco Gallo, the San Francisco importer, has only recently begun bringing in this cheese and a few others from a Calabrese cooperative called Fattoria della Piana. Gallo says the Classico is 7 to 8 months old. It is made with milk gathered from about 50 Calabrian farms, then pasteurized at the dairy. A Riserva from the same producer is aged at least one



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Pecorino Calabrese Classico, an aged sheep's milk cheese.

year, says Gallo.

I enjoyed the Classico as a table cheese, but it is just firm enough to grate on pasta. It is also an ideal complement to the last of the spring fava beans. I grated some Classico over a bowl of pasta with fava beans, but you could serve the cheese and favas as a nibble with aperitifs. The contrast of sweet, raw favas with salty cheese is quite pleasing.

I prefer a red wine to go with the sheep-y flavors in this cheese, such as Librandi's Cirò Rosso, a medium-weight Calabrian red from the Gaglioppo grape.

Look for Pecorino Calabrese Classico at the Cheese Board and Country Cheese in Berkeley, Mill Valley Market in Mill Valley, Sunshine Foods and V. Sattui in St. Helena, Sigona's Farmers Market in Palo Alto and Redwood City, Bianchini Market in San Carlos and Palo Alto, and the Milk Pail in Mountain View.

Next up: Verde capra, a goat's milk blue cheese from Italy.

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