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NATIVE SOIL

VISIT LOMBARDY, PIEDMONT
AND AN ARTISAN CHEESE
MAKER IN SORRENTO

OF FORMAGGIO AND WINE

In the hills of Sorrento, Vittorio Maresca carries on his family's craft of turning out hand-crafted cheese that is best enjoyed with just the right wine.

**By Lauren Birmingham
Piscitelli**

PHOTO BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI





Provolone Monaco cheese hangs
in Vittorio Maresca's shop.

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PHOTO BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

You can't imagine how many pieces of cheese we've made in this cave," says artisan cheese maker Signor Vittorio Maresca, while throwing his hands in the air.

Vittorio and his family descend from a lineage of cheese makers who, for over a century, have produced thousands of handcrafted cheeses at Caseificio Scala. Their shop is set in the hills of Sorrento. Like all the best addresses in Italy, there's no sign and no website. And like any visit in Italy, a quick stop always turns into an extended stay.

Getting to Scala starts with the drive—an adventure that winds along hairpin turns and S-shaped curves through the green hills of the Sorrento peninsula.

Arriving early always ensures the showcase is brimming with local cheeses: provolone, ricotta, fior di latte, mozzarella, caciotte al peperoncino, caciocavalli and diavoletti. I step inside, and the scent of fresh milk permeates the air.

"Buon giorno, Signor Vittorio. Do you have provolone dolce, sweet provolone?" I ask.

Before he answers my question, he passes a plate of several types of provolone and invites me to taste.

The *casari*, artisan cheese makers, start their day at 4 a.m. at Scala with a strong black *caffè*. Then it's time to work. First, they heat the milk in a large vat, stirring until a top layer of cream forms, which they then whip into butter. What remains is *la cagliata* (the curd) and that is made into ricotta. Eight robust casari, dressed in white coats and aprons, make the cheese with their bare hands until the clock strikes *mezzogiorno* (noon).

Vittorio points to the vat of milk and explains the process in Italian, which I'll translate here into English. "The milk is cooked once for fresh cheese and twice for dried cheese," he begins.

He makes many cheeses, some soft, like fior di latte, trecce, bocconcini and mozzarella.

"Provolone stagionato, caciocavalli and caciotta secca, on the



Top left: Signor Vittorio Maresca carries on his family's long tradition of making hand-crafted cheese. Above: **Coastal Sorrento** in southern Italy overlooks the Bay of Naples and holds many charms.



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One of many winding roads that lead through Sorrento.

other hand, are hard cheeses,” he says. “Provolone remains soft and fairly sweet during the first four months. It’s aged in the cave for two years, and as it ages, it ferments and becomes *piccante* (spicy), sharp and dry. If it’s aged for more than two years, it turns into something like Parmigiano-Reggiano, which is from Emilia Romagna, and it’s forbidden to even suggest that it’s made in the south; in fact, it’s a cardinal sin,” he says.

“We have ricotta, too, and we make it by cooking the milk, adding the rennet and letting it form into a custard. Then we break the cheese curds apart, put them in small baskets (colanders), allowing the water to drain. Then we place them into the fridge. When the cheese is firm, it’s dipped into *salamoia* (brine) and put into the *grotta* to age for 12 days. Aging is an important

process in cheese-making, because it determines when the cheese reaches its best flavor,” he says.

He hands me a heaping spoon of ricotta to sample, while sharing his secret recipe for cheese stuffing.

“I use ricotta to stuff ravioli and *fiori di zucca* (squash flowers), because their light texture makes them ideal for fillings. It’s also used in Italian cheesecake,” he notes.

He offers me more samples of *caciottine*, small rounds of cheese that resemble a custard, along with mozzarella. Then, in no time at all, he starts to pour several wines into small juice glasses.

“The *caciotta* pairs perfectly with Fiano di Avellino, a good dry white wine. The aged provolone pairs well with Aglianico, a full-bodied dry red. Smoked cheese pairs well with dry white wine,” he says.

So many different cheeses are paired with so many various wines that I can barely keep up. “You need to taste the wine and cheese in order to understand how they pair,” he insists.

When I ask Vittorio what his favorite formaggio is, he replies, “Provolone dolce. I prefer young provolone. It’s milky and soft like a young maiden,” he says. And, on that note, all the cheese makers stop their work and burst into a roar.

The wine and cheese tasting ends. I make my purchase and leave with some new recipes, which I cannot wait to make.

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Worker finishes tying cheese, left. Caciotta, above, is one of the many cheeses made at Caseificio Scala.

Caciotta (Fresh Cheese)

- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 gallon whole milk
- 1 teaspoon rennet
- Lemon zest, if desired

Add the salt into a large saucepan with the milk and stir until dissolved. Heat the milk to 102°F. Remove from heat and add the rennet, stirring slowly for about 1 minute. Cover and let rest for about 15 minutes.

When you uncover, you will notice the milk has started to curdle. With a knife, gently cut a cross into the top. Cover and wait another 10 minutes. Repeat 3 or 4 more times until about 45 minutes has passed and the top of the milk is cut into squares.

Gently pour the solid (curds) into a large colander and allow the liquid (whey) to run off. Once all the liquid has run off, place the curds into smaller colanders. Put a slice of lemon zest on top and allow the liquid to continue draining off. Store in the refrigerator and serve for up to 3 days. On the third day, this cheese is perfect for using in ravioli or in cooking, as it will have dried out slightly.

Makes 10 to 12 caciotte, about the size of small apples.

Note: Rennet is an enzyme used to coagulate milk, in order to form a thick curd. It is available online and in some health food stores and supermarkets.

Italian No-Bake Cheesecake

For the crust:

- 1 cup crumbled graham crackers or cookies, as preferred
- 6 tablespoons butter, melted

For the filling:

- 1¼ cups ricotta cheese
- ½ cup cream cheese
- ¾ cup powdered sugar
- ½ cup water
- 1 tablespoon gelatin
- 1 cup whipped cream

Mix the cookie crumbs with melted butter and press into the bottom and sides of a 9- or 10-inch baking pan or serving dish. Set aside.

Mix ricotta and cream cheese in a large bowl with an electric mixer.

Dissolve gelatin in water, add to the powdered sugar and whip well. Add to the ricotta mixture while mixing continuously.

Gently fold the whipped cream into the ricotta mixture until well combined. Pour the cream into the crust and chill in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours or until ready to serve.

Makes 8 to 10 servings.

Grilled Mozzarella on Lemon Leaves

This recipe allows plenty of room to be customized to your personal taste, as you'll see in the directions. Also, the role of the lemon leaves is to impart a fresh citrus flavor to the cheese. You'll peel them away before eating. Many grocers and specialty food retailers carry them in the produce section with other fresh herbs.

- 1 8-ounce round of mozzarella or Fior di Latte cheese
- 12 to 15 lemon leaves

Prepare the grill.

Slice the cheese into rounds about 1/2-inch thick. Put the slice of cheese on a lemon leaf and put a second lemon leaf on top. Place on the grill and cook about 2 minutes until the cheese is melted. Serve immediately and enjoy the lemon flavor infused into the cheese.

Alternatively, use smoked provolone and place face down on the lemon leaf. You can also use regular provolone and put an olive or a bit of prosciutto between the lemon leaf and the cheese. You can also roll the mozzarella in a little flour before placing between the lemon leaves for a slightly heartier version.

Also, when you remove the leaves to eat the mozzarella, garnish the cheese with a little grated lemon zest.

Makes 6 servings.