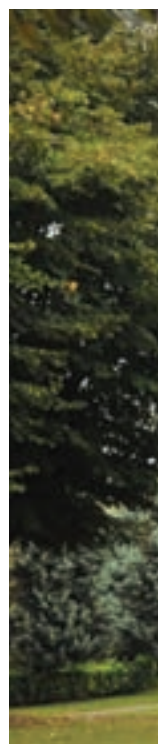


THE LEGEND OF THE BLACK GRANA



ALL PHOTOS BY UMBERTO DOSSENA



The making of tradition

BY LEE SMITH

Sitting in a small abbey called Abbazia Cerreto near Lodi, Italy, is a Madonna. The abbey itself is imbued with Old World beauty and serenity, and its Madonna is special. Seated on wheels of a cheese known as the “Black Grana” of Lodi, She is often referred to as the Black Madonna.

In 1864 a horse-drawn truck filled with Black Grana had an accident on the way to market. The cheese shifted, the truck tipped over and the driver fell to the ground. As the truck toppled over, the cheese tumbled off and fell on the driver. Miraculously, he was saved — other than a few bumps and bruises, he was fine. In honor of the miracle, a statue of the Madonna sitting on Black Grana was commissioned. But the story goes back much farther.

One of the oldest Granas in history, a cheese that predates Grana Padano and Parmigiano Reggiano, is being revived. Its origins go back to the Middle Ages when Lombardy was in its glory.

This story is about a contemporary Black Grana. It's the story of Bella Lodi, a Grana cheese similar to Grana Padano and Parmigiano Reggiano, the story of 1,000 years of tradition. Known as the Black Parmesan due to its characteristic black rind, Bella Lodi is made by the Pozzali family, cheesemakers near Lodi, the capital of the province of Lodi in Lombardy. For over 100 years, the family has been making typical Italian Granas and while their cheeses have followed the traditions of northern Italy, their focus has taken on a new dimension. A rebellion of sorts.

Bella Lodi is neither Grana Padano nor Parmigiano Reggiano but is instead representative of an older cheese, one of the ancient Granas — Grana Lodigiano. Granas originated in and around the Po Valley in northern Italy almost 1,000 years ago. Named for their characteristic grainy texture, these large, hard cheeses are best known as wonderful grating cheeses, but they're becoming more popular as table cheeses, especially when they're young.

The paste of Bella Lodi is unusually white with little seasonal variation. It is preservative-free, lactose-free and made only from locally sourced milk. The aroma is warm with an intense fragrance. The taste is neither too salty nor too sharp, which makes it an excellent table cheese.

The Pozzali family, who originally made Grana Lodigiano and later Grana Padano, has taken on the task of reviving this ancient cheese that was on the verge of extinction. To understand the challenge, one needs to know the history.



The beginning of the great Granas goes back to the Middle Ages, a time when the Po Valley was little more than a swampy lake. For the most part, the people in the area ate fresh cheeses and discarded whatever excess milk that couldn't be immediately consumed or made into fresh cheese.

When the Cistercian monks came to the area, they began to teach the locals about modern water technology that drained the swamps and marshy areas. A system of canals developed by the Cistercians during the Middle Ages is still used for irrigation in the area.

During this same period the Cistercians began to develop a cheese that could be aged for years. This cheese could be kept for long periods so it was able to provide a nutritious source of year-round protein; the aging also allowed the monks to sell the cheese, providing the abbeys with a steady source of income.

Legend says the friars of a monastery near Lodi — the Abbazia di Chiaravalle — invented the first Grana in 1035 CE. The monks called it *caseus vetus*, Latin for old cheese, but it quickly became known as Formaggio de Grana or more

simply Grana because of its unusual grainy texture.

Of course, this proclamation is the stuff of much controversy and, in fact, no written records that verify the story are to be found. The truth lies hidden in the past. It can be verified that an open system of communication among the monasteries existed and travel from monastery to monastery was common. More than likely, many monasteries were working on the same type of cheese at the same time. Regardless of which monastery first developed it, Grana became an instant success and



its production rapidly spread throughout the region.

The great Granas included Grana Lodigiano, Grana Emiliano, Grana Lombardo, Grana Veneto and Grana Trentino, all named for their general area of production. While the basic recipe for each of the Granas was very similar, each region had its own variations.

Very common and maybe the norm for those early cheeses was the black rind. By the 1700s, the mixture rubbed on the rind was oil and an iron oxide of sorts. By the 1800s, the rind was most likely rubbed with a mixture of ash and linseed oil, although other oils, such as grape seed oil, may have been used. The actual mixture probably varied by region and cheesemakers would have had their own “secret” recipes. No doubt a few herbs and spices were included and a lot of experimentation undertaken.

Linseed oil, also known as flaxseed oil, was the preferred oil in Lombardy. It has a unique dehydrating property and is known as a drying oil that often gives rigidity to whatever it’s applied to. It may well be this property that attracted early cheesemakers as it may



have helped form a hard rind that protected the interior paste.

This mixture of ash and oil gradually fell out of favor as more modern methods of controlling the aging of cheese became better developed and better known. However, some traditional cheesemakers were still using the mixture as late as 1954. Some say the practice was abandoned once the pin-dot system of identification was instituted because the black rind obscured the fire-brand and pin-dot identification of Parmigiano Reggiano.

One of the most important developments in the history of Italian Granas was the invention of the steam-jacketed kettle by Alfred Groen in the 1890s. Up until that time, Grana cheese was made in copper kettles heated over wood fires. Only so many fires could be kept burning at one time, so production was limited. Consistency would also have been a problem.

With the invention of the steam-jacketed kettle, companies could produce large quantities of cheese more consistently, and Granas attracted the interest of large companies. By the 1930s, thousands of cheesemakers were making Granas — and standardized

production methods and a system to guarantee quality were needed.

In 1928, a small group of people met to standardize and recognize the name Reggiano Emilia for the Grana produced in Emilia. In 1934, the Consorzio del Grana Tipico was formed to unite and standardize the Granas from other regions, including Modena, Mantua, Lombardy, Parma and Trentino. In 1954, Reggiano Emilia changed its name to Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Tipico became Grana Padano.

Cheesemaking for the Pozzali family had evolved from producing Grana Lodigiano to Grana Tipico to Grana Padano, and now back to Grana Lodigiano with a new name — Bella Lodi.

This generation of the Pozzali family looked back to its roots and felt it was time to resurrect both the cheese the family was making in 1928 and the glorious cheese made famous during the Middle Ages when Lombardy was the envy of all Europe.

Bella Lodi is made from raw milk that's collected seven days a week from farms that sit a maximum of 100 kilometers from the plant, although most is collected from within a 50-kilometer radius. The process of making cheese is essentially unchanged. Equipment is much more modern and quality control not left to chance, but the old techniques are used.

For example, when the milk is collected, it's left to rest so the cream naturally separates and rises to the top. Then it's removed, pasteurized and sold for other products. This technique, developed by the Cistercian monks during a time when nothing was known of bacteria, helps to clean the milk. As the cream rises, it takes the majority of the bacteria with it because the bacteria cling to the fat molecules in the cream. While the Cistercians judged the amount of fat to take off by eyesight, laser technology tells the modern cheesemakers when to stop skimming.

The starter culture is carefully guarded and whey is removed from the last batch of today's cheese to use as a starter culture for tomorrow's cheese.

As an accommodation to modern times and advanced aging techniques, rinds are no longer rubbed with a mixture of ash and oil. Instead, the rind is painted with a food-safe black finish to bring back memories of the Black Grana of Lodi and give the cheese its distinctive look. **CC**



RASPADURA DI BELLA LODI

The tradition of Raspadura goes back to the beginning of Grana Lodigiano. Not every wheel made was perfect or fit for long aging. These imperfect wheels were the first ones consumed, often used to feed the farm hands.

The wheels were cut laterally, and the paste was scraped with a long, curved, flexible blade. In the local Lodi dialect, the technique of scraping is called Raspa. As is traditional, the foods eaten by the locals became the food associated with the region. What was once considered “peasant food” is today held in high regard.

The scraping results in very fine flakes and curls that are soft, light and melt in the mouth. They're served in fluffy piles to be nibbled on alone or accompanied by wine, nuts, or cured meats. Raspadura provides the perfect finishing touch for the traditional dishes of Lodi, such as risotto and polenta. And the flakes are ideal as a topping to carpaccio and cured meats. **CC**