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PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Daniele Fontana*

PECORINO PARADOX

*Friendlier than their reputation suggests, traditional SARDINIANS
seek innovation—and still ignore their dominant cheese*



THIS PAGE: *Peretha cheese hangs at Casa Fadda in Thiesi, above. A Sardinian shop owner poses with a wheel of cheese, below. OPPOSITE PAGE:* Panoramic view of a lake and valley near Olzai, Sardinia.



Lencountered a bittersweet video online while preparing for a cheese-centric journey to Sardinia. In the clip, a Sardinian shepherd near the village of Gavoi recounts his trip into town to renew his ID card. The clerk asks for his occupation. “I’m a shepherd,” says Giuseppe Cugusi. The clerk tells him he must choose another word. The computer doesn’t recognize “shepherd” as an occupation.

In Sardinia, the Italian island that famously has more sheep than people? How could shepherds have disappeared from the bureaucratic vocabulary?

During two weeks of travel around this rugged Mediterranean island, I found similar paradoxes: A culture reliant on coastal tourism but rooted in the mountains; a people who scorn their island’s dominant cheese yet happily sell it abroad; and a traditional cheese community that embraces innovation. Even the two producers I visited, both third-generation cheesemakers, were betting their family’s future on new ideas.

Sardinia and Sardinians confounded expectations repeatedly. Said to be guarded and cool to outsiders, locals welcomed me into their home kitchens and shared their recipes, garden produce, and handmade salumi.

“Most people come here thinking we eat fish,” says Annamaria Ledà d’Ittiri, proprietor of a small country hotel near Alghero, a medieval seaside town with narrow cobbled streets and a broad, sandy beach. “But we’re shepherds. All our traditional recipes are for lamb, pork, and cheese—what comes from the country, not from the coast.”

Over the centuries, the island’s strategic position lured a succession of invaders and compelled residents to seek safety in the oak-covered hills. Today, agriculture contributes only modestly to the economy, but cheese—especially pecorino Romano—accounts for much of that.

Sardinia produces more than 90 percent of Italy’s pecorino Romano, but locals won’t touch it. Ledà d’Ittiri was the first of many Sardinians to tell me they don’t eat pecorino Romano. Nobody does, she insisted. “We eat pecorino sardo.”

(See “The Cheeses: A Glossary” for descriptions, p. 81.)

OTHER PEOPLE’S CHEESE

It’s a paradox to ponder: Sardinians make tons of a cheese, literally, that they rarely use themselves. The United States and Canada are big consumers of pecorino Romano, as is mainland Italy from Rome south. But the flavor is too sharp for the Sardinian palate and, although the cheese is less salty than it used to be, Sardinians have long memories. In two weeks of eating in homes and restaurants on the island, I wasn’t offered that cheese even once.

Peppi Fadda makes pecorino Romano and ricotta at Casa Fadda, his family-run enterprise in Thiesi, in the heart of the pecorino-production zone. On the hour-long drive there from Alghero, silvery olive groves gave way to freshly mown fields dotted with hay bales. My husband navigated the S-curves while I scoured the silent landscape for signs of sheep. It wasn’t easy, but finally, before we began



THIS PAGE: Sheep wander at Azienda Erkiles, a small Sardinian creamery, left. Casa Fadda continues to make feta and other Greek cheeses in Sardinia, below. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Azienda Erkiles owner Giovanni Agostino Curreli admires a wheel of cheese.



the steep descent into Thiesi, I spotted tufts on the distant hills and realized they were moving.

Curiously, the creamery is making *kefalotyri*, a Greek-style sheep's milk cheese, on the day we visit. Many Greek cheesemakers fled to Sardinia during the Second World War, bringing their recipes with them, but only Casa Fadda continues to make feta and other Greek cheeses. Preceding the Greeks, immigrants from Lazio, the region around Rome, had dominated the island's cheesemaking in the last century, lured by plentiful sheep's milk. They built plants for pecorino Romano and shipped the sharp, salty wheels back to the mainland, which explains why Sardinians have always viewed pecorino Romano as a cheese they make for others.

In a big kettle in a steamy side room, Fadda's 22-year-old son, Giuseppe, heats whey drained from *kefalotyri* until more curds surface. Peppi scoops the hot, fluffy ricotta into a paper cup for me to taste. "It's headed for Palermo," he boasts. "It will be in the cannoli sold on Sunday."

It isn't yet noon when we sit down in a

small conference room for a chat, but Fadda retrieves a few glasses and a bottle of homemade grappa from a hutch nearby. A jovial man with a salesman's personality and an entrepreneurial streak, Fadda wants me to taste his entire output, including two ages of the buttery, lemony Maganza, his trademarked pecorino sardo-style cheese.

For Casa Fadda, prosperity lies in making branded cheeses rather than PDO cheeses, such as pecorino sardo and smoked fiore sardo, which others produce. Fadda's creative masterwork thus far is Ovinforth, a sheep's milk blue. Rindless, nutty, and buttery, Ovinforth is mellower and less salty than the Roquefort that inspired it.

A MODERN HIT - IN LONDON

To meet another innovator, my husband and I drive deeper into the island's secluded interior. We stop briefly for a glimpse of Gavoi, a prosperous mountain village overlooking Lake Gusana, its well-kept stone homes decorated with geranium-filled window boxes.

The town is preparing for its annual literary festival, and giant black-and-white photographs of eminent writers hang eerily from building walls, the writers' eyes seeming to follow me. Remembering the video, I stop into a specialty food shop and ask the clerk if he has any cheese from Giuseppe Cugusi, but that name means nothing to him.

Our destination is ten miles beyond, in remote Olzai, one of those ancient, red tile-roofed villages that seem to tumble down the mountain. Its alley-like streets are empty in the late afternoon, although an elderly man emerges from his home to watch us search futilely for our B&B. Only 900 citizens remain in Olzai, in part because the town has the admirable tradition of sending its young people to college, and they rarely return.

Giovanni Agostino Curreli never left. This portly, soft-spoken shepherd assumed the profession of his father and grandfather, managing 500 sheep with help from his son, and making cheeses in a tiny tiled creamery. But his small business, Azienda Erkiles,



WHERE TO STAY

L'Agnata di De André

Via Oschiri, Località L'Agnata
Tempio Pausania
+39 079 671384

agnata.com

A picturesque country property with 10 tasteful bedrooms, landscaped grounds, and a swimming pool. Managers Angelica and Fabrizio have a background in hospitality, and it shows. Eat here at least one night; the cooking is traditional and careful, and Fabrizio knows his wine list.



Wine Resort Ledà d'Ittiri

Località Arenosu 23
Fertilia
+39 329 252 8891

ledadittiri.it

A 15-minute drive from Alghero, this rural estate boasts six spacious, high-ceilinged bedrooms furnished with antiques; breakfast on the terrace includes buttery local ricotta with honey. Open from Easter to mid-October.

Il Cagliarese B&B

Via Vittorio Porcile 19
Cagliari
+39 339 654 4083

ilcagliarese.it

A quiet bed and breakfast in a historic building located in the heart of the city's lively old quarter. Three simply furnished but comfortable bedrooms with modern bathrooms. Hosts Mauro and Lorenzo are supremely hospitable and helpful, and Mauro's breakfasts are sublime: breads and pastries fetched from the bakery each morning (ask for pane di ricotta, tender ricotta buns) and a cornucopia of seasonal fruit.

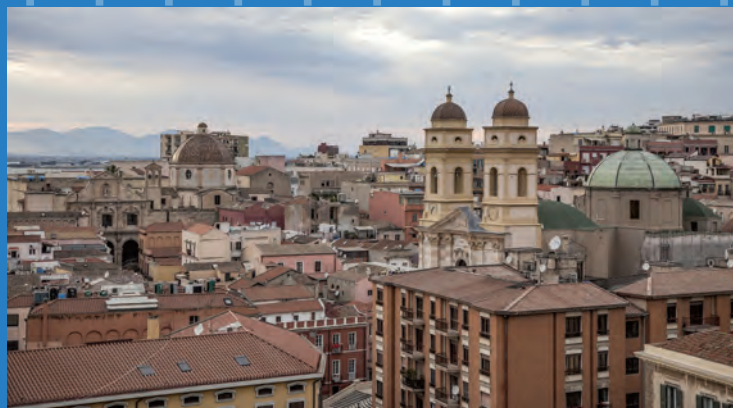
WHERE TO EAT

Osteria Barcellonetta

Via Vincenzo Gioberti 31
Alghero
+39 079 973 2079

ristoranteosteriabarcellonetta.it

Rustic, charming seafood restaurant with outdoor seating. Try octopus carpaccio; handmade trofie pasta with potatoes, squid, and bottarga; and grilled yellowfin tuna.



Trattoria Pizzeria Doña Isabel

Via Mazzini 59
Alghero
+39 079 978897

trattoriadonaisabel.it

Polished, traditional cooking, gently updated. Try *pane guttiau*, warm Sardinian cracker bread with olive oil, sea salt, and rosemary; marinated fresh mackerel; and pasta with octopus and sun-dried tomato.

Ristorante Da Renzo

S. S. 131 Km. 99
Siamaggiore
+39 0783 33658

darenzo.it

On the rural outskirts of Oristano, Da Renzo is considered among the island's finest seafood restaurants. Impeccable *pesce crudo* (raw fish) and *fregola* (couscous-like pasta) with shellfish. Finish with Sardinian almond pastries and a glass of sweet Vernaccia—it's worth a splurge.

Sa Domu Sarda

Via Sassari 51
Cagliari
+39 070 653400

sadamusarda.it

Well-prepared traditional dishes, served graciously in a relaxed, cozy setting. Try *culurgiones* (potato ravioli) with toasted walnuts and pine nuts; fresh fava beans with guanciale; and cavatelli with goat ragù.

To view, sample, and purchase a broad range of Sardinia's cheeses:

Casa del Formaggio

Via Giuseppe Mazzini, 43
Alghero
+39 079 973 3067

Proprietor: Claudio Monti





THIS PAGE: Scenes from the quaint town of Alghero.
OPPOSITE PAGE: The city of Cagliari, where *Il Cagliarese B&B* is located, top. A cozy room at *L'Agnata di De Andrè*, left, and the property's landscaped grounds, bottom.

languished as prices slumped for traditional Sardinian cheese.

“Two years ago, this room was full of unsold *fiore sardo*,” says Bastianino Piredda, a modern dairy scientist and consultant to Erkiiles, as he opens the door to the creamery’s aging cave. “Now everything is pre-sold.”

For several years, Piredda had been experimenting with non-animal coagulants so that Sardinian cheeses—traditionally made with animal rennet—could tap the vegetarian market. The consultant then helped Curreli reformulate his traditional pecorinos with coagulants made from cardoon and microbial rennet. Curreli is a cautious man steeped in old methods, whose grandfather made cheese in a hut over a wood fire. But the old ways no longer paid the bills. Introduced in late 2011, Erkiiles’ vegetarian wheels were an immediate hit in London and have resuscitated the family business since.

And the change improved the cheeses, Piredda says. Curreli’s aged pecorinos are now sweeter, less piquant, because the vegetarian coagulant lacks lipase, the enzyme in animal rennet responsible for that sharp, peppery flavor.

A few days earlier, in Cagliari, I met a local who invited me to a wine shop for a tasting. He brought along an acclaimed cheese for me to try—a *fiore sardo* produced, as it happened, by Cugusi, the shepherd in the video. The cheese was strong, lactic, smoky, and sandy—old-style *fiore sardo*. During my visit to Erkiiles, I describe it to Giangavino Murgia, a friend of Curreli’s.

“In the past, when you opened the door to a home in Gavoi, you smelled nothing but smoke,” Murgia tells me. Heavy salting and smoking preserved the wheels before homes had refrigerators, but some cheesemakers, like Curreli, are minimizing those steps today, with results I prefer. And there’s another paradox: That a producer with such deep roots in the past is helping define a modern path for Sardinian cheese.

With the last of my euros, I purchase a vacuum-packed wedge of new-style *fiore sardo* at an airport shop on the way home. Grated over pasta in the days that follow, the cheese releases a buttery, lemony aroma that remains, for me, the island’s signature scent. **C**



~THE CHEESES: A GLOSSARY~

CASIZOLU (also spelled *Casizzolu*): Cow’s milk pasta filata cheese in a pear shape, similar to *scamorza*, aged one month to a year or more. Also known as *perona* or *peretta*. Firm, pale-gold interior with lactic aroma and buttery flavor. Used in *zuppa Gallurese*, a thick bread soup, and other dishes. “Every Sardinian family has one in the fridge,” says cheesemaker Peppi Fadda.

CASU MARZU: Aged sheep’s milk wheel matured in summer, when tiny cheese-eating larvae transform the paste from firm to creamy; illegal for sale but still found in some shops.

FIORE SARDO DOP: Lightly smoked raw sheep’s milk cheese; mellow when young but strongly lactic, piquant, and sandy when aged.

FRUE: Fresh, tart sheep’s milk cheese with custard-like texture; lactic coagulation.



PECORINO ROMANO DOP: Sharp, salty grating cheese made from raw sheep’s milk.

PECORINO SARDO DOP: The island’s “everyday” cheese, made from raw sheep’s milk in two styles. *Dolce* is mellow, aged fewer than 60 days; *matturo* is drier and more piquant.

RICOTTA GENTILE: Traditional ricotta, usually from sheep’s milk; *gentile* refers to the delicate manner in which the fresh curds are hand-ladled into draining baskets.

RICOTTA MUSTIA: Salted and lightly smoked ricotta, sold fresh and aged; grated on pasta and soups.

RICOTTA SALATA: Salted and aged ricotta; grated on pasta and soups.