



Italian Cheeses Give Flavor to Consumer Cravings

As one of the most popular ethnic cheeses in the United States, Italian-style cheeses add authentic flavors to popular Italian cuisine. Quality ingredients such as hearty pastas, fresh herbs and flavorful cheeses play an important role in Italian cuisine and contribute to the growing desire for authentic flavors. In fact, Italian-style cheeses accounted for almost 4 billion of the 9.5 billion pounds of cheese produced in 2006, with a large volume consumed in restaurants and other foodservice establishments.

But quantity is only part of the Italian-style cheese trend. Quality and variety of these widely appealing cheeses is crucial, and awareness of these cheeses in the broader population has ignited a desire for their versatility, diverse flavors and availability far beyond the traditional Italian niche.





The variety of flavors, textures and applications of Italian cheeses are perfect for keeping to traditional classics, or creating something new. Here is a sampling of the Italian-style cheeses that Wisconsin has to offer:

Soft:

Mascarpone – a rich, buttery and slightly sweet cheese with a thick, creamy texture that is popular for making desserts, dips and spreads.
Season and use in place of mayonnaise in chicken or shrimp salads, or, blend with powdered chocolate, finely ground coffee beans, flavored Italian syrups or liqueur and use as a dessert filling or topping.

Ricotta – this creamy yet slightly grainy curded cheese is produced from the whey that remains after making Mozzarella or Provolone and has a mild flavor with a hint of sweetness.
Blend with Parmesan and fresh herbs for stuffing pastas, poultry and pork.

Blue-Veined:

Gorgonzola – this firm, crumbly cheese is similar to Blue cheese, but the Gorgonzola produced in Wisconsin has less moisture and crumbles more easily. It has a sharp flavor with a slight earthiness to it.
Gorgonzola's texture and flavor make it the perfect component for topping salads or pasta dishes.

Semi-Soft:

Fontina – considered one of the most versatile smooth and creamy cheeses because it makes an excellent table cheese as well as a cooking cheese.
Slice and layer with Italian meats for a delicious grilled panini, or simply serve with a fruity wine and crusty bread for a light snack.

Pasta Filata:

The term "pasta filata" translates to spun paste and refers to the way the curds are kneaded and stretched during production. This process results in cheeses in this family that stretch when melted.

Mozzarella – the second most popular cheese in the United States next to Cheddar, Mozzarella is a creamy white and smooth cheese with a mild and delicate flavor.

Mozzarella is an ideal melting cheese, most popular on pizzas or melted in hot Italian sandwiches. Slice and layer with Roma tomatoes between two slices of focaccia spread with pesto and grill.

Provolone – similar in production to Mozzarella, this firm, pale cheese is always made with whole milk and becomes more granular and sharp as it ages.
Top crocks of flavorful chicken soup with mild Provolone, then broil until the cheese melts and bubbles.

Hard:

Asiago – this cheese has a mild flavor and semi-hard texture. As it ages, Asiago becomes harder and more granular with more of a buttery and nutty flavor.
Grate over flatbread doughs before baking, or grate and toss into a classic Italian pasta dish.

Parmesan – known as the King of Italian cheeses, Parmesan has a sweet, buttery and nutty flavor that intensifies with age.
Although Parmesan is a versatile topping to salads, appetizers and entrees, a popular Italian dessert known as Vin Santo features Parmesan with fresh figs, walnuts and sweet red wine.

Romano – a granular cheese similar to Parmesan, Romano has slightly more fat that produces a sharper, more assertive flavor than its Italian counterpart.
Romano's hard, granular texture is perfect for grating or shaving atop appetizers, soups and entrees.

Pepato – a granular, piquant cheese available with Romano or a Romano/Asiago blend is accentuated with spicy black peppercorns. Wisconsin Pepato typically contains less salt than the imported version, so more of the rich, complex flavor of the cheese comes through.
To add flavor to soups or salads, grate and use as a house seasoning.