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TREASURE *in the* ADRIATIC

*For generations, Paški cheese has been
Croatia's dairy gold*



In hand-painted red block letters, the sign on the crude wooden farm gate reads: *Oštar Brav!* “What does it mean in English?” I ask Martina Pernar, who heads marketing at the largest cheese factory on this Croatian island known as Pag. “It is a joke,” she says, chuckling as we walk through one of the pastures. “It means ‘Dangerous old sheep!’” I stare at the seemingly benign animals, all huddled together. “Don’t worry,” she says. “They are tough, but they don’t bite.”

WILD WEATHER

On this arid 177-square-mile island in the Adriatic populated with 8,000 inhabitants and 40,000 sheep, toughness is a virtue. Pag’s particular breed of sheep—*paške ovce* in Croatian—has adapted to survive scathingly hot summers and frigid winters. (When Australian sheep were introduced to the island in the 1970s, they couldn’t stand the extreme heat or cold and died out.) Built for extremes, the indigenous sheep are the ideal breed for

producing the milk that is used to make the island’s coveted cheese, Paški.

Pag’s rocky limestone pastures are in the path of a powerful winter wind called the *bura*, which kicks up the surface of the Adriatic and deposits sea salt on the grass. The sheep graze on Pag’s salty grass and wild herbs, yielding milk that’s high in butterfat and protein and ideal for making a flavorful cheese. The industry has taken notice; at the 2010 World Cheese Awards held in the UK, one brand of Paški cheese (Sirana Gligora) won three Superior Gold Medals and has won three successive Golden Star Superior Taste Awards from the International Taste and Quality Institute in Brussels. Another producer, Paška Sirana, was awarded gold medals at the 2011 Novi Sad Fair and AGRA Fair in Slovenia. These are the two largest Paški cheesemakers on Pag, but as I soon discovered, there are many small family producers who sell homemade Paški cheese in area restaurants or at roadside stands.

Located in Pag City on the southern part



of the island, Paška Sirana, the oldest cheese factory on the island, was the first company to create the Paški Sir brand that is now recognized internationally. With 65 years of tradition in making Paški cheese, Paška Sirana now exports its cheese to the United States through the distributor Forever Cheese; it's sold at select Whole Foods, Citarella, and other fine purveyors.

Ante Oštarić, Matilda Kurilić-Radić, and Ante Pernar founded Paška Sirana in 1946. In 1968 it partnered with Zagrebačka Mljekara (Zagreb Dairy) to form a joint business. Shortly after Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the organization transformed to a company with stock ownership. In 2008 the “new” Paška Sirana opened its doors with a two-story



building of approximately 20,000 square feet. Its modern facility produces 800 tons of cheese per year, 100 of which is Paški cheese.

The Paška Sirana production is run as a dairy co-op that includes 200 members who together own 3,000 sheep. Pag sheep produce very little milk—a maximum of about one quart per day. A day's milking of 16 to 19 sheep is required to make each five-pound wheel of cheese. Members bring their milk twice a day to one of the ten drop-off points on the island, where it is temporarily stored until collected by refrigerated trucks each day. As the largest Paški cheese producer on the island, Paška Sirana is always looking for more Pag sheep's milk. “We are always fighting for the milk,” Martina Pernar says, laughing.

At the creamery a combination of machine and manpower transforms the fresh milk into Paški. After microbial rennet is added to coagulate the milk, a state-of-the-art machine cuts the young cheese into squares, which are hand-packed into cylindrical molds and pressed for approximately 40 minutes. The molds are then flipped and pressed a second time for an hour. After being pressed, the cylinders are carted off to the *salamura*, where they are immersed in large vats of salt brine for two days. The wheels are then aged on wooden planks—the traditional method—and periodically rubbed with olive oil. The aging process is



OPPOSITE: Pag's native *Paske ovce* sheep have adapted to survive scorchingly hot summers and frigid winters
THIS PAGE: TOP: Small-batch producers of Paški typically sell their cheeses at roadside stands CENTER: It takes the milk of between 16 and 19 sheep to make one cheese. BOTTOM: Training as a Paški cheese taster begins early





THIS PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Filling Paški molds with fresh curd; Stones are used to build enclosures for the sheep; a shepherd retrieves one of his ewes
OPPOSITE PAGE: TOP: Fresh sheep's milk is filtered through a cloth; BOTTOM: Each commercial producer of Paški has an individual number stamped on their cheese to identify its origin.



SUSTAINING SHEPHERDS

Ivan Gligora was born in 1950 in the town of Kolan on Pag. He came from generations of Croatian cheesemakers, and the artisan skills were passed down to him from his father. After completing primary school on Pag, Ivan moved to study in Rijeka in northern Croatia. When financial hardship fell upon the family, he was forced to leave. But determined to finish his degree, he sought a scholarship from Zagreb Creamery in Croatia's capital city, which was offering scholarships in the dairy industry. Ivan became the only educated dairy technologist from Croatia's islands, and he was sent back to his native Pag to work in RO Pag Dairy after he graduated.

After years of working in the field as a top dairy technologist, in 1996 Ivan opened his own family dairy, Sirena-mala Sirana (Little Siren Dairy), with a loan from a friend, which he paid back with cheese. Fourteen years later, on the anniversary of the day Sirena-mala Sirana first opened its doors, Ivan unveiled his state-of-the-art modern dairy, Sirana Gligora.

During a tour of the dairy, which was all white and silver and reminded me of a futuristic lab—especially with its round, submarine-like windows—Ivan's son, Šime,

director of operations at the creamery, explained that the cheesemaking process begins with the delivery of milk from local Pag Island farmers. "In the old days I traveled 200 kilometers in my old Renault 4 for 200 liters of milk to make our cheese," Ivan recalls.

Upon its arrival the milk is pasteurized, then transferred into cheese vats, where the heart of production takes place. After the mixture has had time to set into a curd-like consistency with the aid of animal rennet, it is molded and pressed into cylindrical containers. The young cheese is immersed in brine for one day and is set out to dry before being transferred to the basement limestone cave for aging.

The dairy produces more than 50 tons of Paški cheese annually, from January to the end of June. "Production technology has changed since the old days when our grandmothers made Paški Sir," Ivan says. "In old times they didn't cool the milk or apply heat treatment [pasteurization], and they used ash for coating the cheese."

Sirana Gligora supports more than 250 local shepherds in a cooperative, which helps sustain traditional agricultural practices on Pag. In an effort to protect the authenticity of Paški cheese, the Association of Paški Sir

three to four months for young Paški cheese and approximately a year for aged Paški. "We are afraid when we join the EU in 2013 they might not let us do it this way anymore," says Pernar, who is the daughter of founding partner Ante Pernar. Even though the planks are sanitized, European Union regulations may prohibit the use of wood in the aging process. "It would be a shame to lose tradition," she says.





THIS PAGE: Besides selling small batches of Paški cheese, elderly women on Pag are known for their exquisite needle lacework.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Basket weaving on the streets of Kolan



It isn't uncommon to see an old grandmother dressed in black in a makeshift booth, busy fanning herself and boasting about her family's cheese.

was founded in 2005 and brings together the major producers of Paški cheese on the island. The producers aim to obtain Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status for Paški cheese.

LOCAL FLAVOR

Paški cheese is intertwined with the lives and livelihoods of all of Pag Island's residents. In the summer entire families sit on plastic chairs under umbrellas in front of their houses and sell homemade Paški cheese to passersby. It isn't uncommon to see an old grandmother dressed in black in a makeshift booth, busy fanning herself and boasting about her family's cheese. I've sampled Paški cheese from various roadside stands; always from raw milk, it often has a nuttier, more intense flavor—but like the maker's fingerprints, each is unique.

MIH, established in 1994 by Dubravko Pernjak, is a small family-owned, family-operated dairy located down the street from Sirana Gligora in Kolan. Here the Pernjak family and its 14 employees produce high-quality Paški cheese and *skuta*, a seasonal sheep's milk whey cheese similar to ricotta, as well as three cow's milk cheese varieties. The Pernjak family has been producing Paški cheese on the island since 1890. "We don't

want to lose tradition," says Šime Pernjak, Dubravko's son. "It is very hard work but also a good opportunity for the forthcoming generations to save the rich heritage of Kolan and the island of Pag."

Because of the growing demand for their cheese, MIH built a new facility in 2006, equipped with technology that adheres to the most modern European standards. This new factory produces 22 tons of Paški cheese

annually, all of which is only available at its Kolan shop and select restaurants and markets.

Another small family producer, Restoran Figurica, is situated across from Sirana Gligora in Kolan. Figurica makes its own Paški cheese to sell to guests at the family's restaurant. Ivica Oliverić, the founder and owner, makes two batches per day during the production season—one early in the morning and one in the afternoon. Homemade cheese varies from batch to batch; morning cheese tastes different from afternoon cheese. "All cheese is different," Ivica says. "All depends on the season and diet of sheep."

Figurica's cheese production facilities are located below the restaurant, and its temperature-controlled aging room is aboveground. Each wheel is marked with the Roman numeral III, Kolan's number, and 53, Ivica's identification number, so people know which small producer the Paški comes from. It is their virtual label.

Despite being a small producer, Ivica still churns out a considerable three tons of cheese per year. Every day, all year round, Ivica wakes up at five o'clock to feed his sheep, rams, chickens, and pigs. When Ivica calls his sheep, "Na, mala, na" ("Here, little ones"), they cluster around him. Beaming a smile he adds, "They are like my children." **C**

Kristin Vuković is a freelance writer based in New York City with a particular interest in all things Croatian. She is at work on a book about the island of Pag and writes the blog P.S. From Pag.

TASTING PAŠKI CHEESE



THE OLD Fully ripened Paški has a deeper golden hue. In those extra aging months, the rind deepens to a brownish-golden color. Among the best producers the mature cheese stays moist inside yet has a more crystallized texture. The aged version is often served crumbled and drizzled with olive oil.

THE NEW Aged for just a few months, three-month old Paški Sir is similar to a young Manchego—semisoft with a gold hue and pliable to the touch with a mellow nuttiness. Unlike matured Paški, which ages for around one year, the young cheese can also be melted and served in pasta dishes as a Paški sauce or as shavings.