



Comune di Sogliano al Rubicone  
Assessorato alla Cultura e al Turismo



Pro Loco Sogliano



# Farmaggio di Fossa

Ancient Treasure



## The dawn of the Formaggio di Fossa (pit cheese)

The fascinating history of pit cheese dates back to the **second millennium B.C.**, when semi-nomadic populations used to graze sheep and cattle on the hills that are now part of the territory of Sogliano.

The discovery of some fragments of pierced containers suggests that the difficult art of cheesemaking was already being practiced at that time.

In **ancient Roman times**, livestock farming was still the main source of production in the whole hilly area between Sogliano and nearby Sarsina and the excellence of milk and cheese was known even in Rome: famous writers, such as Silio Italico, Marziale and Plinio il Vecchio, wrote about it.

In the **Middle Age** one of the main problems of the population was the need to preserve food supplies, such as wheat and cheese, in preparation for long winters and possible calamities: famines, sieges, fires or warehouse collapses, which occurred quite frequently at that time. The practice of ditching (infossamento) was widespread: food was piled up in deep holes dug into the ground, in a truncated cone shape, then suitably sealed.

From 1278 to 1640 Sogliano was under the dominion of the **Malatesta** family. At that time there were many pits for the preservation of food in Rimini, Santarcangelo and probably in every castle under the control of the Malatesta family. These pits were created mainly for the preservation of grain, but sometimes also of cheese and other foodstuffs. The Malatesta manuscripts of the XIV century, the statutes of Rimini of 1334 and the **Statutes of Sogliano al Rubicone of 1400** (deemed lost and found in Spain by Msgr. Pietro Sambì) clearly demonstrated that already at that time the pitting techniques were strictly regulated and controlled.

Some documents dating back to the fifteenth century witness that the practice

of “burying” cheese was widespread in the Malatesta territory, within the walls of castles. In particular, a notarial deed of 1497 contains an inventory of assets belonging to a certain Muratori of Murazzano, among which ten or twelve layers of cheese located in the granary pit of a third person are listed (“*circa dexe or dodexe mane de casio in la fossa de Nicolò Gerolamo*”). This important document witnesses the centuries-old and seasonal activity of burying and preserving the spring-summer dairy production in pits owned by others. In a second notarial deed of 1498 there is a list of goods left in inheritance by the deceased Lancetti of Vecciano (Marano valley); among these, also 10 layers of cacio, preserved in a granary pit: “*Stare sei de grano in una fossa in corte apresso la soprascripta casa; item in dicta fossa mane dexe de caso*”. This means that the cheese was a precious commodity, so much to be left in inheritance, and also confirms the close link between grain and cheese, as well as their coexistence in the pits.



## Sogliano and the Formaggio di Fossa



In Sogliano many families used to produce and preserve cheese using homemade methods (e.g. in various containers or in walnut leaves), among which the ditching in their own pits or in pits owned by others. It was soon realized that the cheese extracted from the pits had undergone a sort of fermentation that gave it a special flavour and taste. So the ditching method, from episodic fact, over time became an intentional and customary procedure, although the production of cheeses remained strictly home-made or at the most small-scale hand-

crafted and dependent on the wisdom and skills of the *azdora*.

The practice of the service of the pits on behalf of third parties (either paid or not) also had medieval origins and was initially intended for grain. The activity of ditching was very much linked to that of the community oven and public bakery, in fact in Sogliano most of the ditches were distributed along the ancient Via Frumentaria (now Via Pascoli). Starting from 1700 the production of cheese in Sogliano recorded a considerable impulse, as can be deduced from a notarial deed of 1736, in which the trader from Sogliano A. Onesti undertook to provide in Cesena to two traders from Faenza as much as 30,000 pounds of cheese (more than 10,000 kg) - “*what is currently manufactured and will be manufactured in Sogliano*” - at the cost of 2.95 scudi /100 pounds. Given the very high price for that time, the most logical explanation is that it was a cheese stored in a pit. A peculiar document from 1848 tells us about the theft of pit cheese. It is a letter sent by Count M. Marcelli, Governor of Sogliano, to the Governor of the District of Cesena: “*In the night between 23 and 24 November a qualified theft was committed here by unknown persons of pecorino cheese extracted from an underground pit of this village*”. So the pit cheese was already considered as a small treasure. The written evidence is more extensive since the nineteenth century.

In 1895 **Giovanni Pascoli**, in a letter to his cousin Emilio David of Sogliano, recalls that Mr. Antonio Marcosanti, in front of the Fosse Mengozzi, “*owns the best cheeses in Romagna*”. A few years later the writer from Romagna Pio Macrelli on the magazine *La Piè* wrote: “*The fame of these pits goes beyond the narrow limits of the Municipality and reaches the most remote towns of Romagna, attracting [...] a real crowd of people who bring and collect his bag of cheese*”.





*"Sogliano had from time immemorial its markets that took place on Thursday and Sixtus V (Pope from 1585 to 1590) confirmed these weekly markets with all the ancient customs and privileges".*

From the sixteenth to the twentieth century Sogliano was the reference point for markets and fairs of all the surrounding municipalities, and the pit cheese was an important part of the sales: *"...it is populous and for this reason it is visited by extraordinary and ordinary notables... these are very large markets where three or four thousand people gather together with all sorts of articles for human food*

*purposes"... "where every week markets and fairs are held"* (description of mid-sixteenth century). Many years later the poet Giulio Gozzi wrote: *"...Per lunghe ore, ne' giorni di Mercato, / guarda dall'aia il prato di Sogliano, / bianco come se fosse nevicato / e conta i buoi che giungon di lontano: / giungon dal brullo Passo de' Meloni, / salgon le svolte della Cioca bianca / empiendo l'aria di muggiti e suoni, / mentre la gente in lunghe file arranca."* (*"In cerca dell'antico io smarrito"* - *"I Canti del Rubicone"*).

The importance of this event is also underlined by a nice description of 1950, which we find in the book of memories "La fagiolata", by Giovanna Riguzzi Bonandi, a native of Monteleone: *"I had never been to Sogliano al Rubicone and inside myself I couldn't even imagine how big this mountain village could be, which I had heard about from the people when I used to go to the fountain: someone had been to the magistrate's court, someone had been to the fair, someone had met a relative in the convent of the cloistered nuns and someone else had been stocking up on the famous pit cheese. All of these things impressed me so much that I was thrilled to see them personally. It was 3:00 a.m. when we left our village. Sogliano was fifteen kilometres away; to walk all that way on foot it took several hours and grandma wanted to arrive soon, because then there would have been only the leftovers, she said. As we arrived in the village, grandma was greeted by several people surprised to see her and everyone wanted to offer her a drink, she accepted a couple of glasses of mistrà, her favourite spirit, while I was paid a few bomboloni (I still remember the good taste of that delicious cream!). What an emotion gave me that great village, perched on the hills."* The traditional opening of the pits takes place on 25 November, the day of S. Caterina d'Alessandria. In ancient times this was an event that was very much felt by the population of Sogliano, belonging mainly to the rural class. Once the autumn fruit harvesting and sowing were over and the vinification and olive pressing rites completed, the farmers prepared for the winter interruption of rural work. On S. Caterina's day the farmers came to the village to collect the little cheese left to the pits during the summer to cope with the difficulties of the winter season. In memory of this tradition, the Fiera del Formaggio di Fossa (Pit Cheese Fair) was established, the first edition of which dates back to 1974, on an initiative of the Pro Loco and some volunteers. The entrance to the fair has always been free of charge, demonstrating the traditional hospitality of the population of Sogliano.



In 2009, in recognition of its ancient history and uniqueness, the pit cheese was awarded the PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) with the name **"Formaggio di Fossa di Sogliano P.D.O. Cheese"**. To achieve this, the process was long and demanding and all the parameters of the Production Regulations had to be complied with, including careful inspections along the entire supply chain. The initial cheese, derived from raw or pasteurised milk, must have already been partially ripened for a period of 60 to 240 days.

The forms, with a weight varying from 600 to 2000 grams, are laid in pits dug into sandstone rock, where they remain for 80-100 days; these pits are generally flask-shaped or truncated-cone shaped, with a base of about 1-3 metres in diameter and a depth of about 2-3 metres.

Despite the standardization of the process, the taste and flavour of the final product are very much varied, as they are influenced by

many factors: the quality of the initial cheese, the size and characteristics of the pit, the ripening period, the humidity, the temperature, the position of the cheese in the pit, the contact with the cheeses nearby and, of course, the type of milk used, sheep, cow or mixed; goats' milk is not permitted under the PDO. For this reason, it is correct to say that there is no such thing as an identical pit cheese: each pit cheese is a unique and unrepeatable product.

The production process consists of **four phases**. During the **"preparation of the pit"**, straw is burnt inside the pit to reduce moisture and sanitize it.



The walls are then clad to isolate them from the cheeses, using a layer of about 10 cm of straw supported by a scaffold of vertical canes; wooden boards are placed on the bottom. When the cheese is ditched (**"infossatura"**), it is placed into the pit, closed in bags of white cotton cloth on which identification numbers are written.

The bags are stacked up to the pit mouth, it's almost an art to arrange them properly. The pit is closed with a wooden lid, sealed with plaster or sand. The traditional ditching (infossatura) process

is done in August, the emptying (sfossatura) process in November. The specification also provides for a spring ditching to meet the summer requirements of the product. Once the lid is sealed, the **"seasoning"** process begins, which takes place thanks to the particular conditions of temperature and humidity originated in the anaerobic environment of the pits. The cheese thus continues to ripen for 80-100 days, being enriched by the humours of the ditch. Finally, the ritual of emptying (**"sfossatura"**) is reached: in August, the normal cheese put underground has become **"Formaggio di Fossa di Sogliano P.D.O. Cheese"**, with its unmistakable flavour and fragrance, no longer comparable to the original one. During the emptying process, acrid and stinging smells spread through the village, reminding the citizens of the upcoming Fair.



## Sogliano, ideal "Land" for pit cheese

The production process of the "Formaggio di Fossa di Sogliano P.D.O. Cheese" has very unique characteristics because it is inextricably linked to the specific geological and climatic environment, and to the local tradition itself, which has remained constant over the centuries, and of which only the local 'pitters', who have passed down knowledge and "sensitivity" from one generation to another, are skilled holders. As already pointed out, the practice of burying grain and cheese was once widespread in all Malatesta castles, but Sogliano was the first to use it entirely for cheese. In addition to the particular vocation for pastoralism and the acute entrepreneurial creativity and inventiveness that have always characterized the people of Sogliano, it should be stressed that the village has been especially favoured by the particular geological conformation of the land. The village rises on a layer of sandstone, that is clay mixed with limestone, formed from about 5 million to 1 million years ago, with particular physical and chemical characteristics: sandstone, not subject to the erosive action of the elements, guarantees the stability of caves and recesses dug for different purposes, including that of food preservation. An important aspect of the geology of the area linked to cheese seasoning is the siliceous chemical composition of these rocky deposits, which is extremely stable compared with the acidic substances that are formed by the fermentations induced with the seasoning process. The result is that a pit built on a land not having these particular qualities, in a short time, would experience problems of dissolution of the bottom and walls, as the limestones would be heavily attacked by substances of acid character and, probably, after a few years the pit would no longer be usable.



## What happens during the Seasoning process

During the three months of ripening in the pit, the cheese undergoes physical and chemical changes, induced by the peculiar environmental conditions of the pits: anaerobic microclimate, temperature that tends to be stable, high humidity, presence of certain bacteria. At the end of the seasoning process, the cheeses appear deformed and have a lower weight than initially. The surface is moist and greasy, with no crust. The acidifying activity of lactic acid bacteria counteracts the development of alternative microbial species and degrades lactose, making the final product more digestible. Proteins and lipids are also split, with further improvement in the quality of the final product. The fermentation processes also have a positive effect on the organoleptic features. The flavour is intense and persistent, with hints of truffle and underwood. The sheep's milk cheese has an aromatic, slightly spicy taste. The cow's milk cheese is fine and delicate, slightly bitterish. The mixed cheese has a balanced taste, gentle to the palate. Symbol of the rural culture of Sogliano of yesterday and today, the pit cheese has always raised an undoubted appeal: the uncertainty of the origins, the almost mysterious process of fermentation, the ritual of the emptying process (sfossatura), the unique fragrances that strike the senses... For every person who knows and loves pit cheese, it embodies a different and original set of perceptive and emotional sensations, just as each pit cheese that comes to the light is different and unique.



## The pit cheese on the table



The **Formaggio di Fossa di Sogliano P.D.O. Cheese**, skilfully combined with ingredients enhancing all its flavour, becomes the protagonist of tasty and innovative recipes; a tradition that is revisited in a modern key. It can be simply exalted with a homemade piada and a good glass of "grandfather's" wine, or it can be included in a finely served menu. Excellent for the preparation of appetizers, first courses, main courses and desserts. Its intense and intriguing taste perfectly matches with a more delicate one, contrasting its persistence, for example it is ideal with honey, jams or caramelized figs, accompanied by an Albana di Romagna Passito DOCG. It enriches with balance and decision doughs and fillings: it is traditionally used in the dough of passatelli and in the filling of cappelletti. Either cooked until creamy or flaked, it is excellent on gnocchi and tagliatelle. Appreciated the combination with meats such as carpaccio, fillet or ribs of beef, savoured with a balanced red wine such as a Sangiovese di Romagna DOC.



## Recipes

### ALL TASTE SALAD

Place 300 g of fresh, carefully washed and dried spinach on a serving plate; add 200 g of pit cheese in strips, 100 g of coarsely chopped hazelnuts and 200 g of fresh blueberries. Put into a jar 4 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil, 2 tablespoons of balsamic vinegar, 1 pinch of salt; emulsify and pour on the salad.

### SURPRISE PEARLS

In a bowl put 400 g of dry ricotta cheese, chopped parsley and chives, and plenty of pepper; process the mixture well. Toast 6-8 slices of crumbled homemade bread in the oven. Toast 60 g of hazelnuts and 60 g of baked almonds for a few minutes. Make some ricotta cheese morsels with whole hazelnuts and almonds inside, roll them in bread crumbs and distribute them in small cups. Complete with flakes of pit cheese and pepper.

### SAVOR TART

Mix 500 g of flour with 200 g of butter, 20 g of pit cheese, water q.s.; line a cake tin and bake in the oven for about 20 minutes at 180°C. Pour a jar of savor on the base of the tart, complete with tufts of ricotta cheese, flakes of pit cheese and walnuts.

### ALL TOGETHER

Place 10 cl of extra virgin olive oil, 15 cl of white wine, 4 eggs in a bowl; mix well, add 250 g of flour, 1 sachet of yeast for salty cakes, 80 g of pit cheese, 60 g of Parmesan cheese, 150 g of diced cooked ham, 100 g of sliced olives, 80 g of broad beans (or peas) previously sauteed in a pan; salt and pepper. Pour the mixture into a buttered mould, bake in the oven for 45 minutes at 180°C. Allow to cool and serve.

### DELICIOUS BASKETS

Make 8 disks from a package of brisee dough, coat the tartlet moulds, bake for about 15 minutes at 170°C, remove from the oven and allow to cool. Make a mousse from 300 g of goat's milk cheese with pepper and 30 g of grated pit cheese. Stuff the tartlets with 8 caramelized figs, garnish with the mousse and complete with chopped almonds and a few drops of balsamic vinegar glaze.

### CRISPY STROZZAPRETI

In a bowl mix 300 g of squacquerone, 50 g of grated pit cheese, pepper q.s. and 1 tablespoon of chopped parsley. In a pan brown 200 g of smoked bacon by first removing the excess fat. Boil 400 g of strozzapreti, dress with the cheese cream, finish with the cubes of crispy bacon, chopped parsley and balsamic vinegar glaze.



# L'era ormaggio di ossa

