

**PARMIGIANO-  
REGGIANO: ITALY'S  
KING OF CHEESES**



# PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO: ITALY'S KING OF CHEESES

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how traditional Parmigiano-Reggiano is made, why it has such a storied history, and why the name of the cheese is the subject of heated international arguments today.

## Subjects

Current Events

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Parmigiano Reggiano Factory, Parma
- Musei Parmigiano Reggiano, Soragna
- Various places in Emilia Romagna

## Essential Questions

- What is Parmigiano-Reggiano? How is it made? Why is it so famous?
- How does true Parmigiano-Reggiano differ from “Parmesan” cheese sold in the United States?
- Why is there a controversy today about the use of the word “Parmesan”?

## Academic Summary

### From the Diary of Samuel Pepys during the Great Fire of London 1666

... the fire coming on in that narrow street, on both sides, with infinite fury. Sir W. Batten not knowing how to remove his wine, did dig a pit in the garden, and laid it in there; and I took the opportunity of laying all the papers of my office that I could not otherwise dispose of. And in the evening Sir W. Pen and I did dig another, and put our wine in it; and I my Parmazan (sic) cheese, as well as my wine and some other things.

Parmesan cheese...

When most Americans hear the word “parmesan”, images of a green can with grated cheese for Thursday night spaghetti dinners come to mind. Thanks to intense marketing strategies and brand recognition, American consumers have been using such products since the 1960s. Only within the last few years have many Americans come to understand the difference between “parmesan” sold here and its distant cousin, Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Parmigiano-Reggiano (the name comes from the cities of Parma and Reggio – both in Emilia-Romagna) originated sometime after the fall of Rome. There are no exact dates, but legend says that monks in Emilia-Romagna began making the hard cheese from cows’ milk sometime around a thousand years ago. By the mid-14th century, Parmigiano was famous enough to be mentioned by Giovanni Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, his epic story about the Black Death. Since 1934 true Parmigiano cheese has been sold under the protection of the *Consortium of Parmigiano-Reggiano Cheese*, a legal collective of dairy farmers and cheese producers from the region. In 1955, the Italian government stepped in to issue an executive order stating that only cheese produced under a specific recipe and procedure by consortium members could be labeled as “Parmigiano”, and today the EU recognizes the regions claim to the famous cheese as similar to a trademark. The United States does not recognize such a claim. Needless to say, the issue at times stretches tensions and ruffles feathers. According to Internet statistics, the cheese industry in America (not to mention the rest of the world) is worth billions each year.

The basics of making Parmigiano (or Parmesan) date back to the medieval period. Raw cows’ milk and specific bacteria are slowly heated. Rennet, an enzyme produced in a cow’s stomach, is added to the mixture to produce curdling. After a few minutes, the curd is broken up into small pieces and the temperature is raised. After the curd settles, it is formed into molds. After a couple of days, the cheese wheels are put into a salt brine bath for 20-25 days and then transferred to aging rooms to dry. Drying takes at least 12 months (most are aged at least 24). When the process is finished, each wheel (averaging about 86lbs) is marked with the makers stamp.

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how traditional Parmigiano-Reggiano is made, why it has such a storied history, and why the name of the cheese is the subject of heated international arguments today.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how traditional Parmigiano-Reggiano is made.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Parmigiano-Reggiano has such a storied history.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why the name “Parmesan” is the subject of heated international arguments today.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What is parmesan cheese? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Parmigiano-Reggiano (20 min)
- Video – Parmigiano-Reggiano (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles on Parmigiano-Reggiano, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework.
- Group Activity – Discussion on Parmigiano Reggiano. (20 min)

## III. Closure

- Exit Ticket / Assessment – Short Essay: Explain in detail how traditional Parmigiano-Reggiano is made, why it has such a storied history, and why the name “Parmesan” is the subject of heated international arguments today

## Extension

### **On tour: Parmigiano-Reggiano Factory, Parma**

While on tour in Parma, students will visit the Parmigiano-Reggiano factory, where they can see for themselves how the king of cheeses is made. Tasting is included.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.museidelcibo.it/ing/parmigiano.asp](http://www.museidelcibo.it/ing/parmigiano.asp)  
Museum Parmigiano-Reggiano (website)
- [www.wipo.int/wipo\\_magazine/en/2011/01/article\\_0005.html](http://www.wipo.int/wipo_magazine/en/2011/01/article_0005.html)  
Parmesan – The King of Cheeses (web article) – from the WIPO, this article goes over the controversy with the world's most famous cheese.
- [www.parmesan.com/history/history-of-parmesan-cheese/](http://www.parmesan.com/history/history-of-parmesan-cheese/)  
History of Parmesan Cheese (website) – English website from the Consortium of Parmigiano-Reggiano
- [www.sirio.com/fanticini/English/Products/PR/making.htm](http://www.sirio.com/fanticini/English/Products/PR/making.htm)  
The Making of Parmigiano-Reggiano (website) – great site that explains the making of Parmesan in a way all students can understand.
- [www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/geoinde/en/wipo\\_ds\\_vrs\\_08/wipo\\_ds\\_vrs\\_08\\_www\\_102736.ppt](http://www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/geoinde/en/wipo_ds_vrs_08/wipo_ds_vrs_08_www_102736.ppt)  
Parmigiano-Reggiano (PowerPoint) – from the World Intellectual Property Organization
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev3raLjtCFQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev3raLjtCFQ)  
How to Make Parmesan – Parmigiano-Reggiano (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ph5S-PkGUbQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ph5S-PkGUbQ)  
Retailers Guide to Parmigiano-Reggiano (video). This 10-minute video does a good job of explaining the basics behind how the cheese is made and its history, and is appropriate for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BZEy6dSY6Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BZEy6dSY6Q)  
How Parmesan Cheese is Made (video)

### Background Information

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parmigiano-Reggiano>  
Parmigiano-Reggiano – Wikipedia article

## Key Terms

- Parmigiano-Reggiano
- Rennet
- Trademark

