



BRINGING AUTHENTIC CHEESE TO THE AMERICAN TABLE

Michele Buster, co-founder of specialty importer Forever Cheese, and Cathy Strange, global cheese buyer at Whole Foods, explain to ItalianFood.net the strategy behind their offer

Favored by a varied terroir, a secular tradition and unique taste, Italian makers of specialty cheese have the potential to win a larger slice of the US market as appetite for artisanal cheeses spreads, two leading US buyers said. The US cheese market is expected to grow an average annual 2% in value terms and 1% in retail volumes over the 2015-2020 period, according to Euromonitor International. Italian cheese exports to the US increased 6.9% to

275 million euros in 2015 compared to the year before, according to calculation by the Italian Trade Agency (ITA-ICE) on data by the US Department of Commerce. Such expansion, which defies a crowded and highly-competitive market, is driven by the discovery of new flavors and regional products, according to Euromonitor. Italy is the world's largest foreign supplier of cheese to the US, with a 23.8% market share, according to ITA figures.



Michele Buster, co-founder of New York-based specialty importer Forever Cheese

But keeping the momentum vis-a-vis competition from European powerhouses like France and Spain and resurgent local production requires a careful strategy involving all the players of the production and supply chain.

PIONEERING IN QUALITY

Educating consumers as well as retailers to the unique quality of the numerous cheeses available will continue to be a priority for the industry in the next years, said **Michele Buster, Co-Founder of New York-based specialty importer Forever Cheese**, which imports cheese and other specialty products from the Mediterranean region.

"Since day one we have always been educators," Buster told ItalianFood.

net, recalling the continuous efforts made since the company's creation in 1998 to correct common mistakes (also of pronunciation) and explain the differences between original products from Italy and American-made cheeses of the same name. "We had to explain what sheep's milk was. Every single thing need to be defined, including how to pronounce the names of the cheeses," Buster said. As a testament to the interest in high end Italian cheese, Forever Cheese imports Genuine Fulvi® Pecorino Romano, a tangy, hard cheese made from 100% sheep's milk and one of the few still produced in the countryside of Rome with local milk. Forever Cheese was the first to

"I AM LOOKING AT A CHAIN OF INTEGRITY FROM THE ANIMAL TO MY DOOR"

Cathy Strange, global cheese buyer at Whole Foods



bring aged buffalo milk cheese in the US, with softer products like the Casatica (™) and the Quadrello® di Bufala favored for their rich taste. "We explained why that cheese was different and we continued over the years. We have always done it. It's a lot more work, but it's more rewarding," Buster said. Telling the story of cheeses could help new producers find their way to the US, according to **Cathy Strange, the Global Cheese Buyer for US grocery chain Whole Foods**.

"I have tasted amazing products but some have still not made it to the United States. I look forward through the coming year to be able to export products on a high level and know that customers' expectations continue to grow the more they know and the more they travel. It's exciting," Strange told ItalianFood.net. "The Gorgonzola consortium has a big story to tell. We have worked really hard with Parmigiano Reggiano to have their story out. **I do think there is opportunity also for Pecorino Romano and other Pdo cheeses**, there is great opportunity around that," she said. Appetite for both hard and soft varieties is likely to continue as Americans get familiar with more pronounced flavors, such as Asiago and sheep's milk cheese, said Euromonitor. Over the past years, cheeses have been made with all sorts of unusual spices and flavoring on the outside, Buster said. But recently there has been an overabundance of such products. "Anybody can put any sort of herb or spice on a cheese but the quality of well-made cheese is another story," she said.

"That is always our top criteria. If we're not convinced and we don't love it, we're not going to sell it."

In the large food retail industry, according to Euromonitor, the popularity of hot sauces like sriracha has prompted food giant Kraft Foods to launch in late 2014 a shredded cheese line with hot habanero, jalapeno and pepper. Examples of premium flavored cheeses imported for many years by Forever Cheese include Sottocenere® al Tartufo, a semi-soft cow's milk cheese aged in ashes (the company's portfolio includes a truffle version by Veneto-based cheese maker Sergio Moro) as well as "Ubriaco", (which means "drunk" in Italian), a cow's milk cheese also from

KEY FACTORS

US cheese market totaled 22.1 billion dollars in retail sales price value in 2015

Retail value of organic cheese jumped 11.3% in 2015 to 494.8 million dollars

Sottocenere® is a cheese that still has an enormous following, like a cult cheese

There is only a handful of importers who represent Italy very well

There is opportunity also for Pecorino Romano and other Pdo cheeses



Sottocenere® is a cheese that still has an enormous following in the Usa





CHEESE

ITALIAN CHEESE ON STAGE AT AJ'S FINE FOODS

A selection of fine Italian cheese is on offer at AJ's Fine Foods, an upscale gourmet food retailer part of Arizona-based, family-owned grocery chain group Bashas'. At the store of Mesa (near Phoenix), the "Fromagerie" refrigerated section offered authentic Grana Padano with the Protected Designation of Origin mark and the Agriform cooperative logo, at a price of 6.60 dollars per 0.33 pounds (150 grams), or 19.99 dollars per pound. The Grana Padano plastic-wrapped portions were presented



together with Pecorino Romano from Locatelli, and Parmigiano Reggiano with the consortium mark, shown with a wheel of the cheese. On display close to the Grana, Parmigiano Reggiano and Pecorino were the biggest competitors of Italian cheese, from Swiss Fondue, Apple Smoked Cheddar Cheese from Wisconsin and an Asiago cheese with rosemary and olive oil by Sartori, a Wisconsin-based cheese maker founded by Italy-born Paolo Sartori in 1939.



Veneto aged in wine must to preserve it. "Sottocenere® is a cheese that still has an enormous following, like a cult cheese," Buster said.

A POSITIVE EVOLUTION FOR GOAT'S MILK

Apart from Piedmont, finding aged goat's milk in Italy has been difficult for some time. "I'm really happy to see that there's so much more choice available. I'm always looking for raw goat's milk, from people who are willing to do what it takes so that I can bring it here and sell a safe product," she said.

The US cheese market totaled 22.1 billion dollars in retail sales price value in 2015, down 0.4% from the

sure transparency starting from how animals are fed to how the products reach consumers' table.

"It's not enough to have good cheese anymore, we also need to have the safety behind," Buster said.

"My customers have always wanted to know where the cheeses come from - now they want to know more in-depth information about the ingredients, the process, the social aspect of the cheese plant and of course the safety," the buyer said. This is putting pressure on smaller producers to comply with regulation, and have the cheeses analysed.

An advice for them is to research their well-known peers in Italy, especially those in the same geographical area, and understand who their distributors are, Whole Food's Strange said.

"There is only a handful of importers who represent Italy very well," the industry expert said. "It is very much like choosing who is doing the construction of your house," she said.

Spreadable processed cheese saw the fastest growth last year

SHIPPING TO THE US ALSO REQUIRES SPECIAL CARE

Forever Cheese only ships by boat, to ensure a steady transportation in refrigerated containers.

"We bring the fresher cheeses every week or every other week to have a quick rotation in order to ensure freshness," Forever Cheese's Buster said. "This is our philosophy as well as, we want to sell product in amazing condition."

Shipping should also avoid too many stops along the way, Whole Foods' Strange said. "I am looking at a chain of integrity from the animal to my door."

previous year as prices declined, according to Euromonitor International. Spreadable processed cheese saw the fastest growth last year (up 2% at 2.34 billion dollars), helped by new products and an emphasis on marketing. Cream cheese accounted for 85% of value sales of spreadable processed cheese, as Americans mainly consume it at breakfast, spreading it on toasted bagels, and also use it to prepare cheesecakes, dips and frostings. Outperforming the market, retail value of organic cheese jumped 11.3% in 2015 to 494.8 million dollars. But demand for regional specialties is not enough to win shelf space in the US market, as producers must comply with strict safety regulations and en-



GRANAROLO, A FAST PACE IN FOREIGN MARKETS

The dairy group introduces many new features both for the domestic and international markets thanks to an aggressive and effective internationalizing strategy

The Granarolo Group has a great desire to grow and innovate in Italy and especially abroad. In pole position is the full range of Italian milk for international markets: UHT milk, organic UHT milk from selected and certified farms, goat milk, milk as a children's snack, and especially Granarolo milk for babies, the innovative high-quality line for children, aged 0-3, made with the highest security standards. Granarolo is the first foreign company with a factory certified by the Chinese authorities to produce and market milk for infants in the largest market in the world. On the stand there is also a space specifically dedicated to the tasting of the 100% Vegetable Granarolo line, which, in Italy, has managed to win over about 10% of the market (in value) in one year. It is made only with Italian soybeans, rice, almonds and hazelnuts, without GMOs. This is a rich line of vegetable drinks, vegetable yogurt alternatives, vegetable seasonings, and ice cream, which was recently enriched by the latest additions:

the vegetable-based food burger, ready meals, and natural seit. A range of products with high added value was also developed overseas markets: "Longer life mascarpone," which has a 9-month shelf life that does not affect the great creamy texture, and the delicate flavor of fresh milk, is the only such product that has been approved by the *Ampi-Accademia dei Maestri Pasticceri Italiani* (Amp. Accademy of Italian Master Pastry Chefs), as well as the range of IQF-technology frozen mozzarella, which is available in various sizes and cuts, with a shelf life of 24 months. There are also long-life cream and béchamel products (designed for export) to complete the line. At Cibus, also the new range of Granarolo ice creams, Ghioni gourmet products, PDO Parma Ham, and Granarolo Pasta were displayed. Finally, alongside the classic PDO cheese products - Gran Padano, Parmigiano Reggiano, Sardinian pecorino, Roman pecorino and gorgonzola - are also the much-appreciated regional specialties such as Tuscan pecorino cheese (made from Pinzani raw milk), Amalattea goat cheese from Sardinia, and the caciocavallo from the Sila area, a PDO product from the Calabria region.

THE GOAL TO BE REACHED IN THREE YEARS: 35% EXPORT

Thanks to new foreign acquisitions, by the end of 2015, particularly in New Zealand, Brazil, and the Baltic countries, Granarolo confirms its commitment to become a reference group for the Italian agri-food sector. It aims to do so by consolidating its position in its markets (milk and milk derivatives) and, in parallel, by expanding the product ranges that best represent our country abroad. The goal is ambitious: to exceed 35% exports in the next three years.

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