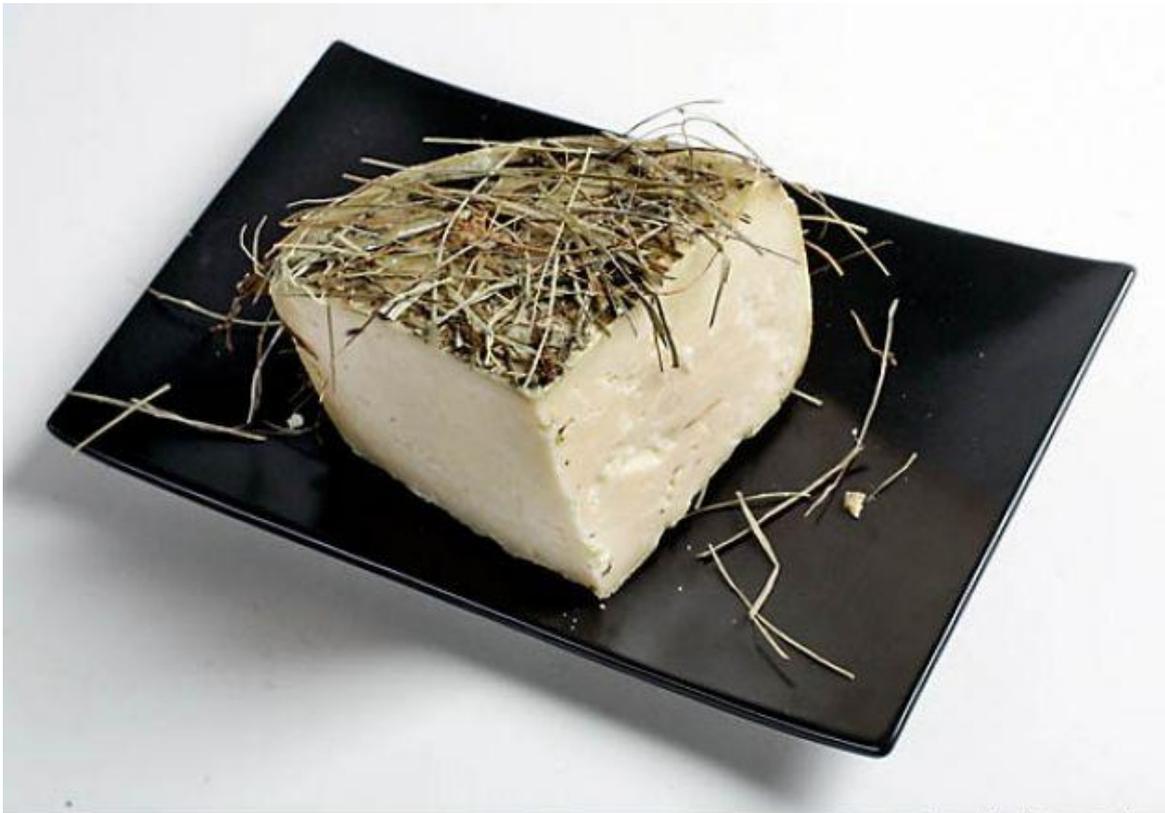


A roll in the hay does wonders for Vento d'Estate

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Published 4:00 am, Thursday, June 8, 2006



Chronicle / Katy Raddatz

CHEESEo8_005_RAD.JPG Vento d'Estate cheese. Photo shot in San Francisco, CA. on Thursday, June 1, 2006. (Katy Raddatz/The Chronicle) Photo taken on 6/1/06, in SAN FRANCISCO, CA. **Vento d'Estate Photo: Katy Raddatz

Vento d'Estate (VEN-to dess-TAH-tay) debuted less than 10 years ago but already has a considerable American following. This Italian cow's milk cheese, robust in flavor, won't be to everyone's taste, but anyone would have to admit that it has a personality.

The name means "summer wind," an evocative moniker for a cheese with a pronounced herbaceous aroma. If you think the cheese smells like freshly mown hay, bravo. The wheels are aged under a blanket of hay, a procedure that cheesemaker Antonio Carpenedo dreamed up -- according to company lore -- when he and his wife Giuseppina were driving along a country road and found themselves behind a hay wagon. The grassy scent was so pleasant that they stopped the driver, bought some hay and started their cheese experiments.

La Casearia, the Carpenedo family firm that created Vento d'Estate, is based in northeastern Italy, in the Treviso region. Whether the hay incident really happened -- well, who knows? But the company has a history of cheesemaking invention. Its first product, a resounding success, was Ubriaco (meaning "drunkard"), a cow's milk cheese steeped in red wine. More than 20 years later, in the late 1990s, the company introduced Vento d'Estate, a 5-pound wheel made from pasteurized milk and matured under hay in oak barrels.

The wheels are about 3 inches in height, with a waxy rind that still has bits of hay clinging to it. The paste is ivory to straw colored, firm, dense and crumbly, with an aroma that mingles grass and sour milk. The flavor is lactic and moderately sharp. It doesn't burn your tongue, as some cheeses do, but it leaves a strong sourish impression.

Vento d'Estate needs a generous red wine to stand up to it. I thought it met its match in the 2004 Bonny Doon Vineyard California Aglianico, a wine rich with fruit but not overly tannic.