



# Maine Welcomes Mid-Coast Cheese Co.;

## Eastern Seaboard Has A New Source For Traditional Teleme

Italian groceries, specialty shops and supermarkets on the East Coast have a new source for Teleme – a cheese with a long history in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Teleme is a creamy white cheese made from whole milk, similar in texture to domestic Brie. Manufactured by a handful of northern California cheese makers, it slipped from attention in the late 1960s when some early producers stopped making it.

Third generation cheese maker Franklin Peluso had been making Teleme for about 25 years in California before relocating to Maine and establishing the Mid-Coast Cheese Company.



His grandfather began making traditional Teleme – kin to cheeses from southern European countries like Romania, Italy and Greece – in the 1920s. In 1933, Peluso's father Giovanni Peluso joined the family business and made Teleme until the early 1960s.

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—Jack Eisenstadt,  
Mid-Coast Cheese Company.

Even at the height of its demand, there has always been a dearth of Teleme manufacturers, according to Peluso.

“There has never been more than two factories at a time that have successfully produced Teleme for the commercial market,” he said.

From about the late 1960s until the early 1980s, most producers made what was frequently called “Teleme Jack” – a hybrid of Teleme and Monterey Jack cheeses, Peluso said.

Waning demand for Teleme can be attributed to a dwindling ethnic market, according to Peluso.

“At one time, demand was high,” he said. “But once Italian, Portuguese

and Greek immigration died off, so did the market for traditional Teleme.”

“The whole complexity of the marketplace had changed. The traditional Italian markets in San Francisco had virtually all disappeared. There was a steady erosion of ethnic stores,” Peluso continued.

“The West Coast still has a following – particularly in the Bay Area – but it's fairly limited,” said Jack Eisenstadt, director of sales and development for the Mid-Coast Cheese Company.

It was around that time when a cheese broker and friend suggested Peluso learn the craft of making traditional Teleme from the one man who really knew how to do it – his father.

The problem was that Teleme was a very small part of Franklin's production, Eisenstadt said.

A very tiny amount was available. “The word in San Francisco was that it was hard to score Teleme,” he said. “It hasn't had its full visibility because it wasn't readily available.”

“Even the people who knew cheese intimately hadn't had much experience with Teleme because of its limited availability,” he continued.

Peluso made Teleme cheese in the Los Banos area for 25 years before relocating to the East Coast. Besides yearning to become a New England resident, Peluso believed there was a stronger ethnic make-up in the East and a blossoming of specialty stores.

“There's been a tremendous change in the past 15 to 20 years. It's a crowded field with specialty cheeses now,” Peluso said. “Some of these stores remind me of Paris with huge piles of cheeses.”

While scouting possible locations to make his cheese, Peluso discovered the “very accommodating” State of Maine Cheese Company in Rockport, where he currently shares cheesemaking facilities.

He began making Teleme in Rockport late last year, using a milk supply from local farms.

“It took some adjustment to get used to East Coast milk, which has a higher milkfat,” Peluso said.

Teleme is a tricky cheese to make

because of its high moisture content, Eisenstadt said.

Mid-Coast Cheese makes a six-pound rice flour Teleme, which Eisenstadt describes as a “big Italian cheesecake dusted with rice flour.” This cheese holds a bit more acclaim, is slightly more prized in the niche market than the company's six-pound Teleme loaf, which is a bit firmer.

Both varieties can be used as ingredients in Italian pasta dishes or as a snacking cheese teamed up with delicacies like polenta.

With the help of two other employees, Mid-Coast Cheese makes Teleme three or four days a week.

The company remains a presence in the West Coast market, working with a network of distributors to ship its cheese to both coasts and spots in between.

The company also hopes to launch other cheese varieties in the future, including a washed-rind, smear-ripened style similar to Taleggio and goat's milk Teleme.

Mid-Coast Cheese recognizes the importance of reaching out to its customers.

Using grassroots efforts, the company continually sends samples of Teleme to stores and conducts demonstrations.

It also works with chefs from restaurants and hotels throughout the Northeast, exhibiting traditional and innovative uses of Teleme. Most recently, it conducted a series of chefs' workshops in the Portland area.

One of Mid-Coast's primary targets is the group of older ethnic customers who frequent the old-style Italian markets in places like New York and New Haven, Eisenstadt continued.

Though its name is Greek and the maker Italian, Mid-Coast Cheese

Teleme is an American treasure with a mild, delicate, distinctive flavor and a host of uses – spread on crusty bread or with pears, peaches, dried apricots and figs.

It can also be used as a table or cooking cheese in polenta, risotto, pizza, burgers or fondue – a great melting cheese, Eisenstadt said.

With new markets and customers, Peluso has high hopes for a nationwide revival of Teleme.

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“There's much of the country that we haven't covered,” he said. “We've only just scratched the surface.”

For more information on the Mid-Coast Cheese Company, contact Jack Eisenstadt at (413) 667-0044.



Franklin Peluso (both photos) has moved his Teleme operation to the East Coast (photo credit: Sheana Davis/The Epicurean Connection)