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* A PASSION FOR PARMIGIANO REGGIANO *

*Ever noticed those tiny salt-like crystals in the hard, strong-flavored grating cheeses classified in Italy as grana? The word indicates there are tiny crystals suspended in the paste. **Parmigiano Reggiano** is the finest type of grana and I adore it served simply as a table cheese accompanied by a fine red wine, but that savory salty crunch has inspired in me hundreds of innovative recipes—so many I could write a whole cookbook on its many uses.*



Parmigiano Reggiano

can be stored, tightly wrapped, in the refrigerator for weeks, but we prefer storing it in the freezer to prevent drying out. It is ideal for cooking because it seldom becomes stringy, and it stars as a topping for almost any casserole, turning brown and crusty in the baking. Easiest of all, grate it over pasta and salads with a hand grater or microplane, as close to serving time as possible for finest flavor.

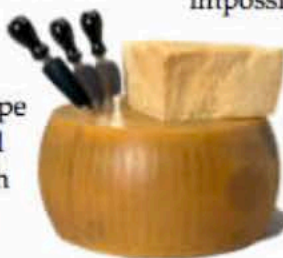
I'm crazy for the wildly trendy Fricos, little cheese appetizer wafers made by simply baking on parchment paper small piles of grated cheese topped with fresh herb leaves until crisp and bubbling, then cooled until crisp. Large Fricos, while still warm, can be molded into bowls to hold Caesar Salad. Among the most astonishing in my own recipe repertoire is a Parsley Salad enthusiastically shared with me by the late James Beard when we were lecturing together on a cruise ship long ago. My guests never stop raving about this.

Quality of this cheese is key. The very best, and most imitated imported brand is Parmigiano Reggiano named after the areas of Parma and Reggio Emilia in Emilia-Romagna, Italy where it is produced. Its name is stamped on the rind and its slightly salty, piquant flavor, makes it one of the best cheeses for seasoning recipes. Buy it from a whole wheel, if possible, in a cheese shop or Italian deli, and

look for pale yellow color and a mild flavor—ask to taste it! It is not exported until two years old and it ages better than almost any other cheese.

Before grating, remove the rind, which is hopelessly hard and impossible to grate, and do what Marcella Hazan, author of many fine Italian cookbooks does—save it to use in flavoring soups. If using a food processor, cut the cheese into ½ inch cubes and chop them finely with the steel blade rather than with the grating disc, which will break when a hard cheese is pressed too vigorously against it.

Now here is the aforementioned salad that doesn't sound special but it is—very! Serve it in very small portions on overlapping thin slices of ripe heirloom tomatoes as a first course. Made in larger quantities and heaped in a bowl on a buffet, it will create a sensation!



James Beard's Parsley Salad

To prepare in advance: This is best freshly made at room temperature, but keeps quite well in the refrigerator for up to two days.

- 4 cups curly parsley clusters, leaves only, washed and dried
- 1 clove garlic, peeled
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons finest quality red wine vinegar
- ¾ cup finely grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper

Place the parsley leaves in a bowl. Combine the garlic, olive oil and vinegar in a blender container, and process until garlic is pureed. Pour the dressing over the parsley and toss lightly until evenly coated. Sprinkle the grated cheese over and toss well to distribute the cheese evenly. Season to taste with salt and pepper.