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The Italian Diaries

DOP, IGP, TSG - Oh, My!

by Jessica Andrews

I always see three little letters on Italian foods--both here and in Italy--and the ones that have them are always significantly more expensive than the ones that don't. I figured these initials were similar to the DOG/DOGC rating on wine that tell you they have been created from start to finish by traditional standards in traditional regions, but there seem to be so many combination of letters and I've never quite understood the difference. And they're on the strangest things. Who would expect a traditional production certification on basil?

When I looked into it a bit more I found out there are only actually three basic designations for foodstuffs but that Italy have translated those into Italian and thus there are six combinations of letters you might come across on regimented Italian foods: Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) or DOP is the strictest designation. For a product to be DOP it must be prepared, processed AND produced within a certain geographical region and entirely by traditional means (of which there are detailed guidelines). Italy has 138 DOP foods including "Traditional" Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, several varieties of garlic, pancetta, prosciutto, and oils, many cheeses, potatoes from Bologna and San Marzano tomatoes. The seal is red and gold and will be on any product that is PDO or DOP certified.

Italy has 83 food items that have Protected Geographic Origin (PGI) status--or in Italian, Indicazione Geografica Protetta (IGP). A bit less stringent than DOP, PGI/IGP status means that the item was prepared, processed or produced "at least in part" in a traditional way within a certain geographic location. Some examples would be Balsamic Vinegar of Modena (without "Traditional" in front of the name), several varieties of fruits, vegetables and nuts including Sicily's red oranges and a few types of chestnuts, some types of prosciutto and salami and a handful of grains.

It is important to note that some types of food (like prosciutto, for example) might be classified as either DOP or IGP, depending on the particular manufacturer or producer. The PGI/IGP seal is blue and gold, with blue on the outside edge, instead of DOP's red.

If you see a seal that's blue and gold but has a gold edge, it will either be on mozzarella or--get this--pizza! The Traditional Specialties Guarantee (TSG) or Specialita Tradizionale Garantita (STG) designations don't have anything to do with geography. TSG/STG means only that the item has a "specific character" that distinguishes it from other products because it was made by traditional means. Pizza Napoletana is one of the only two Italian foods with a TSG/STG certification.

The big debate is really whether or not the normal person can taste the difference between say, a non-certified San Marzano tomato and a DOP San Marzano tomato. In a tomato taste test posted on "Pizza Slice Blog" not only did results show that tasters didn't rate DOP San Marzano tomatoes higher than non-DOP ones, but that they didn't even rate San Marzano tomatoes higher than other tomatoes in general! The certifications do, of course, cost money, so there may be many producers who follow traditional standards but choose not to register their products in order to give a lower price to the consumer. But really it's all probably a matter of what exact taste you're looking for, your individual palette, what you're used to and what you're expecting that determine what you prefer, but now at least I know that if I want that "traditional" Italian taste I'll look first for PDO/DOP, second for PGI/IGP and then possibly TSG/STG.