C/2024/5348

2.9.2024

Publication of an application for registration of a name pursuant to Article 50(2), point (a), of Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council on quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs

(C/2024/5348)

Following this publication, the authorities of a Member State or of a third country, or a natural or legal person having a legitimate interest and established or resident in a third country, may lodge, in accordance with Article 17 of Regulation (EU) 2024/1143 of the European Parliament and of the Council [1] an opposition with the Commission within 3 months from the date of this publication.

SINGLE DOCUMENT

'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ'

EU No: PDO-MT-02973 — 10.7.2023

PDO (X) PGI ( )

1. **Name(s) [of PDO or PGI]**

'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ'

2. **Member State or Third Country**

Malta

3. **Description of the agricultural product or foodstuff**

3.1. *Type of product*

Class 1.3. Cheeses

3.2. *Description of the product to which the name in (1) applies*

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is a fresh cheese produced with whole raw milk from sheep (*Ovis aries*) of the 'Maltese' breed and its crosses with the Friesian breed or others, and that are registered in the Maltese islands, including Malta, Gozo, and Comino.

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' can be sold fresh ('Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' friska), air-dried ('Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' niexfa), or pickled and peppered ('Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' tal-bżar).

The three varieties of 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' – 'friska', 'niexfa' and 'tal-bżar' – should possess the following characteristics (grouped together in summary, with exceptions indicated as necessary):

Presentation

— Height: 1,5 cm – 5 cm

— Weight: 30 g – 110 g

— Base diameter: 5 cm – 7 cm

— Top diameter: 2,4 cm – 5,5 cm

— 'Tal-bżar' variety presents itself with a varying amount of ground black pepper attached to its surfaces.

[1] Regulation (EU) 2024/1143 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on geographical indications for wine, spirit drinks and agricultural products, as well as traditional specialities guaranteed and optional quality terms for agricultural products, amending Regulations (EU) No 1308/2013, (EU) 2019/787 and (EU) 2019/1753 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012 (OJ L, 2024/1143, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1143/oj).

External appearance

— Rindless

— Appears as a truncated cone with slanting sides to a varying degree.

— Top surface is flat or slightly concave.

— Lateral surface is obliquely convex.

— Surface may be cross hatched based on the motifs of the mould.

— Appearance is glossy, soft, with a wet look ('friska'), dry or greasy ('niexfa'), with a humid surface ('tal-bżar').

— The colour is white ('friska'), ivory to straw yellow ('niexfa'), pale straw yellow to ochre ('tal-bżar').

Internal appearance

— No under-crust.

— Occasional presence of holes in 'niexfa' and 'tal-bżar' varieties.

— No marbling.

— Occasional presence of slight fissures in 'niexfa' and 'tal-bżar' varieties.

— Semi-hard to hard structure depending on the drying period and conditions (except for the 'friska' variety where the structure is creamy, soft, humid, and slightly greasy).

— The colour of the core is white ('friska'), ivory to pale straw yellow ('niexfa' and 'tal-bżar').

— For the 'niexfa' variety, the colour may vary from the perimeter to the core, with it being slightly lighter at the core.

Organoleptic properties

— The aroma is of low intensity. It carries the odour of fresh milk and imparts a slight smell of sheep ('friska'), has slightly acidic characteristics ('niexfa'), or is spicy (of black pepper) ('tal-bżar').

— The taste is sweet, with a light saltiness ('friska'), is sweet to slightly acidic ('niexfa'), or moderate to high acidic with a spicy oral sensation ('tal-bżar').

— The texture is humid and greasy ('friska'), soluble to slightly adhesive ('niexfa'), or humid to chalky ('tal-bżar').

— The gustatory persistence is low ('friska'), moderate to high ('niexfa'), or highly acidic and peppery ('tal-bżar').

Chemical properties

— Total Protein: 14 % – 40 %

— Total Fat: 15 % – 40 %

— Tel. 4,7 – 5,3

— Total Solid Content: 37 % – 56 %.

3.3. *Feed (for products of animal origin only) and raw materials (for processed products only)*

The maximum percentage of feed sourced outside the geographical area is 45 % dry matter on an annual basis. It is not technically possible to source 100 % of the feed locally from the geographical area due to the lack of rainfall and limited availability of land.

The sheep are fed locally sourced hays of leguminous and cereal plants for at least 55 % of their intake (including barley, lolium, wheat, vetches, fava, sulla, maize, sorghum, alfalfa, ryegrass, and clover, amongst others), supplemented with concentrates produced from raw materials and distributed by the major feed mills. Depending on availability, sheep may also be fed locally sourced plants such as carobs and cladodes of prickly pears. The taste of the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is related to this use of local feed.

The raw sheep milk is wholly sourced from the specific geographical area for all three 'ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' varieties

Raw sheep milk from herds of the 'Maltese' breed and its crosses registered in Malta, Gozo, or Comino, to make the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ'.

The raw sheep milk has the following chemical characteristics:

— pH between 6,4 and 6,7;

— fat content between 4,5 % and 8,0 %;

— protein content between 5,0 % and 6,5 %;

— dry matter content between 15,0 % and 18,0 %.

3.4. *Specific steps in production that must take place in the identified geographical area*

The production steps that take place in the geographical area are:

— Farming (breeding, rearing, milking of Maltese breed sheep and crosses)

— Cheesemaking from the raw sheep milk of Maltese breed sheep and crosses

— Maturing of the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ'

3.5. *Specific rules concerning slicing, grating, packaging, etc. of the product the registered name refers to*

All three 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' varieties are sold in their entire form.

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' friska is sold solely by quantity, while the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' niexfa and 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' tal-bżar are sold either by weight or quantity.

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is packed either singly or in differing quantities depending on the producer and the requirements of the customer(s), in various transparent plastic or glass containers, each sealed with a band sticker and labelled.

Normally 1kg of 'Ġbejniet tan-nagħaġ' using the 24-hour drip method are produced from 6,8 to 8 litres of sheep milk depending on season and diet. This works out as 125 g to 147 g of 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' (i.e., 0,125 kg to 0,147 kg of 'Ġbejniet tan-nagħaġ') at 24-hour drip per litre of sheep milk.

The three varieties of 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' are rindless and therefore need to be packaged within the production area before being marketed. Handling of this rindless product beyond the production area would lead to microbial contamination.

Packaging is necessary for 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ friska' to safeguard and protect its delicate structure given the freshness and friability of the cheese. Packaging is also necessary for 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ tal-bżar' in view of the pickling and application of ground/crushed black pepper which renders the surface humid; handling would therefore ruin the product's flavour and aroma.

Slicing is neither accepted nor practical for all three products given their size, which is less than 120 g per piece.

Grating is only relevant for the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ niexfa'. To retain the specific taste and aroma of the product, and to be able to confirm its origin, grating must take place at the place of production and within 6 weeks of production.

In summary it is not viable for the product to be packaged outside the geographical area because of loss in the quality of the product brought about by the restrictions and limitations of transportation, due to Malta being an island whereby the closest EU port in Sicily (approx. 80 km), and because of the inherent difficulty in controlling the quality of the protected product.

3.6. *Specific rules concerning labelling of the product the registered name refers to*

The product has a rectangular label with the term: 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' and in addition a descriptor in italics as listed below:

— '*friska*', or '*niexfa*', or '*tal-bżar*';

— The logo of the certifying control authority.

— The EU quality symbol

4. Concise definition of the geographical area

The Maltese archipelago consists of three inhabited islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino and other uninhabited minor islands.

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is produced in the three inhabited islands. Malta is a state limited in size (316 km^2), much smaller than most geographical areas considered for other PDO products. Due to this small size and its geophysical characteristics, Malta is not sub-divided into regions for the term 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' and the PDO shall cover any 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' produced across the archipelago.

5. Link with the geographical area

The Maltese islands are situated almost in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea with a characteristic sub-tropical Mediterranean climate.

In and around Malta, evaporation greatly exceeds precipitation, and this renders the sea water with a specific gravity of 1,0300 (higher than the Atlantic), and with relatively warm surface temperatures. The sea surrounding the islands greatly affects the climate, which is cooler and more humid compared to the inland areas of the continent. The high thermal capacity of the sea also reduces large fluctuations in the ambient temperature of the islands. The Maltese climate is characterized by unpredictable weather in spring; hot, dry, and generally rainless summers; short autumn periods; and mild, wet winters with waves of cold air. The average annual temperature is 18,6 °C, ranging from 12,4 °C during winter to 26,3 °C during summer. The most common forms of local precipitations include rain, hail, dew, and soft rime. The average total precipitation is 553 mm, SD 157 mm. The mean relative humidity varies from a minimum of 61 % in July to a maximum of 87 % in January. The mean annual wind speed is of 16,3 km/hour, with considerable variation in the monthly averages; 60 % of prevailing winds are from the west to the northwest whilst on hot days the heat is often aided by southerly winds that sometimes carry the 'gibli' bringing over red sand from the Sahara.

The name 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is linked to the region in virtue of the Maltese language. Within the 27 Member States, Maltese stands out as a very specific language due to its Semitic-based origin, written in a 30-letter Roman alphabet, with some special consonants that are unique to the Maltese language, and two of which also appear in the name (i.e., 'għ', and 'ġ'). The name of the cheese has also made its way into several Maltese expressions and idioms (e.g., 'qisek ġbejna', meaning to be laid-back), highlighting the linkage between the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' and Maltese culture.

The arid terrain typical of the Maltese islands favours the keeping and feeding of sheep, as these animals can use marginal agricultural areas unsuitable for other agricultural purposes. Often, the taste in the air is salty due to the humidity, surrounding sea, low profile of the island (highest point is 121m), and unpredictable and often windy conditions. This saltiness, which results in tropospheric salt deposition on the surfaces of the vegetation, explains the effects of the surrounding environment on the three 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' varieties while air-drying.

The flora is typical of the region and of pelagic islands that have a similar geological formation. Malta has no rivers or freshwater lakes. The valleys and ravines are described as dry riverbeds, and fill up with water during periods of rainfall. Given the hot dry summers, natural flora during this period is inexistent and grazing is not possible. Maltese soils are derived from the calcareous rock with a pH over 8. The distribution of plants in the Maltese islands is closely related to its geology and topography. The arable crops cultivated as fodder include chickpea (Cicer arietinum), sulla (Hedysarium coronarium), barley (Hordeum vulgare), pale pea (Lathyrus ochrus), Indian pea (Lathyrus sativus), lentil (Lens culinaris), prickly scorpion's-tail (Scorpiurus muricatus), common wheat (Triticum aestivum), southern vetch (Vicia ervilia), and common vetch (Vicia sativa). These crops are sown in small very nutrient poor areas where there is a large presence in the native weed species, particularly Leguminosae, a wide variety of trifolium which are harvested with the rest of the sown crop. The plants of Vicia faba grown to supply broad beans are also harvested, dried, and used as summer fodder. The feed of sheep is also supplemented with cladodes of prickly pear (Opuntia ficus-indica) and locust beans from the carob tree (Ceratonia siliqua). This flora is reflected in the flavour and structure of the product. This sweetness is perceived mainly in the 'friska' and 'niexfa' varieties, and the cheesemakers acquire the experience and knowledge of the right mix of fodders to obtain this desired sweetness in the product from past generations.

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is a simple cheese with minimal processing. All additions (e.g., vinegar, pepper) are during post-production and superficial.

Once the ewes are milked, ensuring the right temperature of the milk afterwards is also an important criteria, as otherwise the softness of the 'friska' variety is lost, and there is an increased presence of holes and fissures in the 'niexfa' and 'tal-bżar' varieties. Diluting the coagulating enzyme and adding it to the bulk of the milk in the best traditional way ensures the right texture; if too much enzyme is added the curd will be too firm, and all three varieties will lose their shape. The time waiting for the formation of the curd and recognizing the right consistency of the curd are important too, as taking too long to turn the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' in the mould leads to the 'friska variety' not taking the shape of the mould, and more holes and fissures in the 'niexfa' and 'tal-bżar' varieties. The correct draining process maintains the shape of the cheese. With experience, the producers also learn the best duration for the pickling to maintain the highly acidic and peppery gustatory persistence characteristic of the 'tal-bżar' variety.

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' has a short seasoning period, and the drying is carried out naturally whenever possible in bespoke cabinets on the roof of the cheesemaker's farm. All steps involved in the cheesemaking process are typically carried out by the cheesemaker through years of specialisation. These include milking, filtering, re-heating the milk when necessary, addition of the coagulating enzyme, coagulation, placing in moulds, turning, and draining. It is a production process that requires training, and is usually carried out from one generation to the next.

The expert cheesemakers are skilled in choosing the right days for the drying of the product and this skill is acquired from passing the experience from one generation to the next. Through this experience, producers also know that when southern winds with high humidity or desert rain are forecast, drying is done using alternative methods to maintain the semi-hard to hard structure and ivory to ochre colouring of the 'niexfa' and 'tal-bżar' varieties.

There are no written records regarding the specific steps involved in the production process and the knowledge and experience of the cheesemaking process and specific methods has been passed on from generation to generation; as confirmed by a survey on the production of the 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is indicative of this product. The experience of the older generation forms the basis for the teaching of those interested primarily within the family. The experience of the older generation, contribute to the specificities common to all varieties of 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ'. Learning these practices ensures the continuity and consistency of the quality of this traditional product

The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ' is an integral part of the Maltese culinary heritage and is included in several traditional Maltese recipes. The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ friska' was used as stuffing for Maltese cheesecakes ('pastizzi'), savoury pies ('torta tal-ġbejniet'), and ravioli, or incorporated in Maltese winter soups like 'soppa tal-armla' and 'kusksu'. The 'Ġbejna tan-nagħaġ tal-bżar' is served as an appetizer with Maltese water crackers ('galletti') or in Maltese bread dishes ('ħobż biż-żejt').

Historical records indicate that grazing sheep have been present on the Maltese islands since medieval times, while the earliest reports on cheese-making date back to the 15th and 17th century. Cheesemaking was a logical way to preserve the milk for longer periods of time, particularly during warm weather conditions, especially since dairy produce could only be consumed on meat-eating days in view of the prevailing Catholic cultures and traditions. During the different eras, sheep were mostly kept in very small flocks belonging to each household to provide the necessary milk and dairy products for their own subsistence. Larger flocks have also been kept throughout the ages to produce the same typical products utilising the same methodologies and to be marketed commercially. These commercial herds are becoming more important in present times given the larger urbanization occurring on the islands, and the demand for this product. While limited modernisation was a prerequisite in the past two decades, the traditions of past generations have been kept alive as most producers remain small-scale and family run, retaining the personal link with their flock of sheep.

Reference to publication of the specification

https://mccaa.org.mt/Section/Content?contentId=7953