



photo: Robert Fitterman

Provel: The Mystery of a St. Louis Cheese

It's disgusting and it's delicious.

Provel cheese is probably not one of the samples you'd be offered from a fancy cheese shop— unless, of course, you live in St. Louis. But even in the Gateway to the West city, few people really know what Provel is, besides that it's smothered on pizzas and appears, mysteriously, like cheese worms, on many St. Louis salads at Italian restaurants. But what *is* Provel?

For starters, it's not even legally cheese. According to the FDA, Provel can't even be classified as cheese because it doesn't meet the requirements. So when I say "cheese," I'm really talking about Provel's official categorization: "pasteurized processed cheese."

Provel is one of the most famous regional foods in St. Louis, and it's almost impossible to find it anywhere else in the country. In fact, if the cheese is manufactured anywhere outside of St. Louis, it isn't considered Provel, and has to be labeled as "St. Louis-Style Cheese."

The recipe was concocted in 1947, when the owners of St. Louis's Costa Grocery (now Roma Grocery) decided they didn't like how stringy mozzarella was after taking a bite of pizza. They wanted to create a cheese that melted well and had the same gooeyness as mozz, but without the stringy-ness. Despite the popular myth that Provel is a combination of provolone and mozzarella, it's actually a mix of white cheddar, Swiss, and provolone cheeses (but doesn't taste like any of the three). With a low melting point and gooey texture, Provel is used on much of the pizza in St. Louis and when it cools down, it becomes kind of like a plastic-y buttery substance.

"People from St. Louis love it," said the owner of Joe Fassi Sausage & Sandwich Factory on the Hill, the city's Italian neighborhood. "When we switched to provolone, people wanted the Provel." Others comment that Provel is a bit sharper: "Provel has more bite, more smokiness, more tang than, say, mozzarella," says a researcher at the St Louis Central Library.

It's a mysterious cheese, no doubt, and a mystery that stays in St. Louis.