



# UNIVERSITÀ DI PARMA

## ARCHIVIO DELLA RICERCA

University of Parma Research Repository

Dynamics of a natural bacterial community under technological and environmental pressures: the case of natural whey starter for Parmigiano Reggiano cheese

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

*Original*

Dynamics of a natural bacterial community under technological and environmental pressures: the case of natural whey starter for Parmigiano Reggiano cheese / Bertani, Gaia; Levante, Alessia; Lazzi, Camilla; Bottari, Benedetta; Gatti, Monica; Neviani, Erasmo. - In: FOOD RESEARCH INTERNATIONAL. - ISSN 0963-9969. - 129:(2020). [doi.org/10.1016/j.foodres.2019.108860]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11381/2869684 since: 2022-01-18T16:12:48Z

*Publisher:*

Elsevier Ltd

*Published*

DOI:doi.org/10.1016/j.foodres.2019.108860

*Terms of use:*

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available

*Publisher copyright*

note finali coverpage

(Article begins on next page)

1 *Dynamics of a natural bacterial community under technological and environmental pressures:*  
2 *the case of natural whey starter for Parmigiano Reggiano cheese*

3

4 Gaia Bertani<sup>a§#</sup>, Alessia Levante<sup>a§#</sup>, Camilla Lazzi<sup>a</sup>, Benedetta Bottari<sup>a</sup>, Monica Gatti<sup>a</sup>, Erasmo  
5 Neviani<sup>a</sup>

6 <sup>a</sup>Department of Food and Drug, University of Parma, Parco Area delle Scienze 49/A, 43124,  
7 Parma, Italy

8 <sup>§</sup>Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript

9 **# Address correspondence to:**

10 Dr. Gaia Bertani

11 Department of Food and Drug, University of Parma, Parco Area delle Scienze 49/A, 43124, Parma,  
12 Italy

13 E-mail: [gaia.bertani@studenti.unipr.it](mailto:gaia.bertani@studenti.unipr.it)

14 Phone: +39 0521 906524

15 Dr. Alessia Levante

16 Department of Food and Drug, University of Parma, Parco Area delle Scienze 49/A, 43124, Parma,  
17 Italy

18 E-mail: [alessia.levante@unipr.it](mailto:alessia.levante@unipr.it)

19 Phone: +39 0521906524

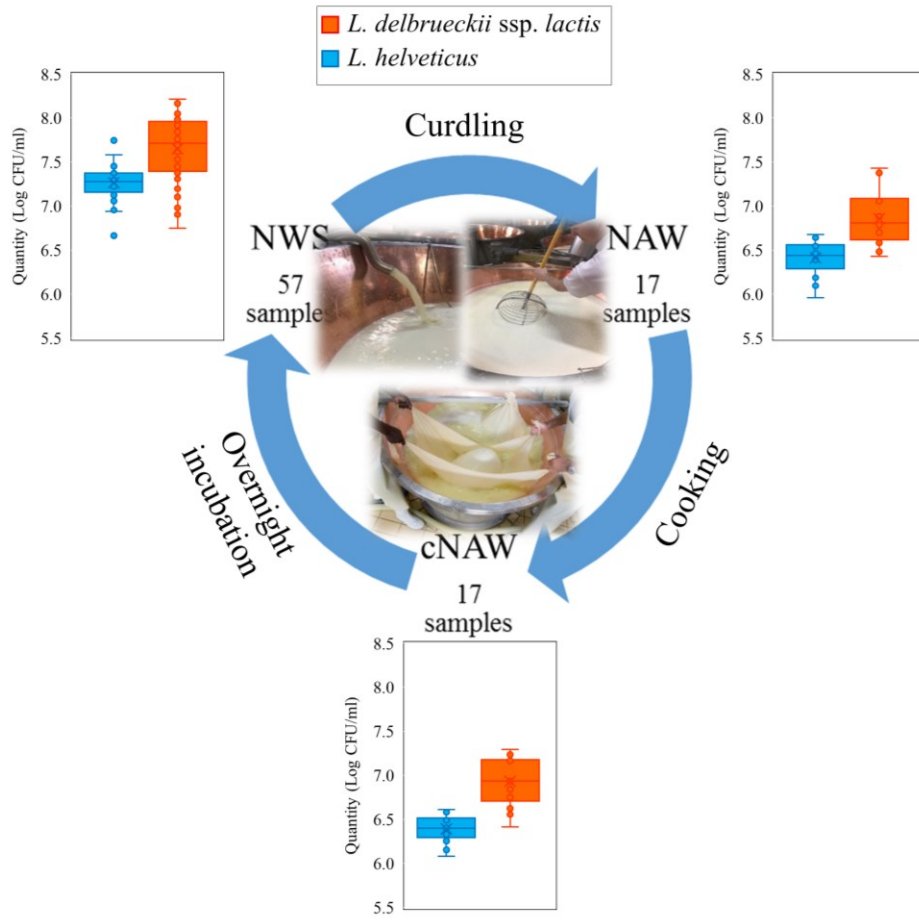
20

21 **Highlights**

- 22 1. qPCR and metataxonomics were applied to describe the dynamics of NWS microbiota
- 23 2. Species present in the whey respond differently to cheese-making technology
- 24 3. The microbiota of NWS, regardless of initial composition, is shaped by technology.

25

26 Graphical abstract



27

28

29 **Abstract**

30 Natural starter cultures are undefined multiple-strains culture communities of mostly thermophilic  
31 lactic acid bacteria (LAB), in association with minor amounts of mesophilic bacteria, which  
32 structure could be affected by small changes in the parameters of the cheese/whey-making process.  
33 This study aims to investigate the complex microbiota of natural whey starter (NWS) used in  
34 Parmigiano Reggiano (PR) cheese-making, focusing on both the absolute and relative abundance of  
35 bacterial species and on the modification of the bacterial community under environmental and  
36 technological pressures.

37 To reach this purpose a combined approach, using quantitative PCR (qPCR) and High-Throughput  
38 Sequencing (HTS), was used to investigate the bacterial dynamics of 91 whey samples collected  
39 during different steps of PR cheese-making, in one dairy, through two different lines of production,  
40 one Conventional and one Organic, over a 10 weeks period. Our results highlighted that NWS used  
41 for the production of PR cheese is a dynamic microbial community, which adapts to the different  
42 technological parameters encountered in the cheese/NWS manufacturing process, while retaining a  
43 high level of resilience of the thermophilic LAB species mainly involved in the steps of curd  
44 acidification and the early maturation process. Differences were also observed in bacterial species  
45 diversity between samples from Conventional and Organic line but, in conclusion, NWS resulted to  
46 be shaped by technological treatments, regardless of its initial different composition.

47

48 **Keywords:** Natural whey starter, thermophilic lactic acid bacteria, qPCR, High-Throughput  
49 Sequencing, undefined starter cultures.

50

51

## 52 1. Introduction

53 Parmigiano Reggiano (PR) is a Protected Designated Origin (PDO) cooked, long ripened and hard-  
54 textured cheese exclusively produced in a defined geographical area (Gatti, Bottari, Lazzi, Neviani,  
55 & Mucchetti, 2014).

56 PR is manufactured employing raw cow's milk, using a mixture of partially skimmed and whole  
57 milk. In detail, the evening milk is partially skimmed after overnight spontaneous creaming, and  
58 subsequently mixed in a 1:1 ratio with the whole milk from the following morning milking. The vat  
59 milk is heated at 32 °-34 °C and added with natural whey starter culture (NWS) and then calf rennet  
60 to achieve milk coagulation. As soon as the curd reaches the proper firmness, it is broken down  
61 with the use of 'Spino', a dedicated tool employed to obtain small-sized granules (approximately  
62 the size of rice grains), with a size distribution that is not too large (Iezzi et al., 2012). At this  
63 manufacturing step whey syneresis occurs and this whey is not yet acidified (non-acidified whey,  
64 NAW), compared to NWS. Afterwards the curd is heated up to 54 °C (53 °-56 °C) for 5-15 minutes  
65 under stirring. Following cooking, the granules previously obtained aggregate at the bottom of the  
66 vat. Curd is removed from vat, manually cut in two parts and stored in a mold for 2 days, entering  
67 the subsequent manufacturing steps that will lead to the final product, as carefully reviewed  
68 elsewhere (Gatti et al., 2014; Gobbetti, Neviani, & Fox, 2018). The remaining whey, that is cooked  
69 and not acid (cooked non-acidified whey, cNAW; Bottari et al., 2010), is recovered and incubated  
70 at a decreasing temperature to produce NWS to be used for the cheese-making of the following day.  
71 This back-slopping procedure establishes a microbiological *liaison* among subsequent batches of  
72 production. During the first few hours of cheese-making, the thermophilic microorganisms present  
73 in NWS grow in the curd and play a key role in the acidification step (Johnson, 2013). The  
74 thermophilic microbiota able to resist to the curd cooking temperature is also crucial for the cheese  
75 ripening (De Dea Lindner et al., 2008; Gatti et al., 2008). NWS cultures are undefined multiple-  
76 strain cultures of thermophilic lactic acid bacteria (LAB) (G. Giraffa et al., 2004; G. Giraffa &  
77 Neviani, 1999; Giorgio Giraffa, Gatti, Rossetti, Senini, & Neviani, 2000; Lombardi et al., 2002),

78 which have a greater dynamic survival under different selective pressures if compared to selected or  
79 single strain cultures (Erkus et al., 2013). Previous studies concerning PR NWS attributed  
80 predominant microbiota to *Lactobacillus helveticus* (Cocconcelli, Parisi, Senini, & Bottazzi, 1997;  
81 Coppola et al., 2000; Gatti, Lazzi, Rossetti, Mucchetti, & Neviani, 2003; Gatti, Trivisano, Fabrizi,  
82 Neviani, & Gardini, 2004). Further knowledge on microbial structure of PR NWS was provided by  
83 Bottari et al. (2010) by using culture-independent techniques. The use of Length Heterogeneity  
84 (LH)-PCR and Fluorescence In Situ Hybridization (FISH), demonstrated that the majority of tested  
85 PR NWS were composed by comparable percentages of *Lactobacillus helveticus* and *Lactobacillus*  
86 *delbrueckii*, while *Lactobacillus fermentum* and *Streptococcus thermophilus* were present in lower  
87 amounts. It has been demonstrated that small changes in the technological parameters like  
88 temperature of curd cooking, temperature and modality of cNAW cooling and differences in the  
89 acidity and pH, could affect the bacterial consortium present in NWS (Rossetti et al., 2008). Despite  
90 the findings provided by these studies, the composition of these microbial cultures adapted to  
91 selective pressure of food processing is not fully understood yet. Therefore, in this study 91 PR  
92 whey samples were collected from one PR dairy over 3 months. Fifty-seven NWS were collected  
93 just before addition to the vat milk, while 17 NAW samples were collected after the use of ‘Spino’  
94 and further 17 cNAW samples after the curd cooking treatment. Samples were taken from two  
95 different production lines: one Conventional and one Organic, where the Organic line employs milk  
96 from cows fed only with organic feed The two production lines are independent, and are compliant  
97 to the disciplinary regulations provided for PR manufacturing (Single document of the PDO  
98 Parmigiano Reggiano). This study was performed in order to understand the dynamics of bacterial  
99 structure of whey over time, according to the different production line and in response to the  
100 different technological steps. The aim of this work was: (i) to characterise the bacterial community  
101 of the two type of whey collected to increase the existing knowledge, and (ii) to investigate how  
102 selective and environmental pressures shape the bacterial community typical of PR NWS.

## 103 2. Materials and Methods

## 104 **2.1. Selection of natural whey starter samples**

105 Ninety-one whey samples used in PR manufacturing were collected from one dairy located in the  
106 province of Parma and belonging to the PR PDO cheese area of production. In the cheese factory,  
107 the Organic and Conventional lines are kept separated and each makes use of different milk and  
108 uses its own NWS, which is propagated separately. Both production lines use milk that respects the  
109 disciplinary regulations provided for PR manufacturing (Single document of the PDO Parmigiano  
110 Reggiano), which differ in the fact that the organic line employs milk from breeders certifying that  
111 cows only eat organic feed. These samples were collected during different steps of PR  
112 cheese/NWS-making (Fig. 1): in particular, 57 NWS samples were collected just before the addition  
113 to the vat milk, 17 samples after the use of 'Spino', i.e. right after the curdling step, and 17 samples  
114 after the curd cooking step. The latter are non-acidified whey (NAW) and cooked non-acidified  
115 whey (cNAW) samples, respectively. The 57 NWS samples were collected three times a week,  
116 while the NAW and cNAW were sampled from the same vat once a week, from August to October  
117 2017. NWS acidity was measured and expressed as Soxhlet-Henkel degrees ( $^{\circ}\text{SH}$ ; Mucchetti and  
118 Neviani, 2006). Samples were shipped to the laboratory under refrigerated conditions, and stored at  
119  $-80^{\circ}\text{C}$  before the analysis.

## 120 **2.2. DNA extraction and quantification**

121 Microbial DNA extraction was performed using DNeasy Blood and Tissue Kit (Qiagen, Hilden,  
122 Germany) with slight modification. The following steps were performed to remove fat and milk  
123 impurities: 1 mL of NWS was mixed with 2% (wt/vol) of sodium citrate solution at  $50^{\circ}\text{C}$  in 10 mL  
124 final volume for 30'. Ten mL of NAW and cNAW were mixed with 2% (wt/vol) of sodium citrate  
125 solution at  $50^{\circ}\text{C}$  in 20 mL final volume for 30'. The mixtures were centrifuged at 10000 rpm for 10  
126 min at  $4^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The supernatant and fat layers were removed, and the cells were re-suspended in 1 mL  
127 of sodium citrate, repeating the washing step for 2 times until all impurities were removed. The cell  
128 suspensions were centrifuged at 10000 rpm for 10 min at  $4^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Subsequently, the manufacturer's



129 protocol for DNA extraction from Gram positive bacteria was followed, doubling the reagents  
130 volumes. Briefly, the cells were lysed in 360  $\mu$ L of lysis buffer containing 25 mg/mL of lysozyme  
131 for 30' at 37 °C. The lysed cell suspension was protease treated for 30' at 56 °C. At the end of the  
132 spin-column protocol, the DNA was eluted with 60  $\mu$ L of nuclease-free water, and the concentration  
133 and purity of the extracted nucleic acids were determined by Nanodrop (NanoDrop™ 2000, Thermo  
134 Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA).

### 135 **2.3. Absolute quantification through qPCR**

136 The absolute quantification of *L. helveticus*, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*, *S. thermophilus* and *L.*  
137 *fermentum* species, was performed on the 91 collected samples, using specific primers (Table 1)  
138 designed on *pheS* gene sequences ( Bottari et al., 2013). Master mix for each primer pair contained:  
139 10  $\mu$ l of 2 $\times$  PowerUp SYBR Green Master Mix (ThermoFisher Scientific, Milan, Italy), forward  
140 and reverse primers at a concentration of 250 nM and nuclease-free water to a total of 20  $\mu$ L per  
141 well. All the reactions were performed in duplicate, and no template controls (NTC) were included  
142 in each experiment. Total DNA, previously extracted, was 10-fold diluted with nuclease free water  
143 and added to the reaction in a 5  $\mu$ L volume. The plate, after a short centrifugation, was placed in the  
144 QuantStudio® 3 instrument (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA), and  
145 thermal cycle run as follows: a first hold stage of 2 min at 50 °C followed by 10 min at 95 °C, 40  
146 cycles of 15 s at 95 °C and 1 min at 60 °C, during which fluorescence acquisition took place, and a  
147 final melting curve stage from 60 ° to 95 °C with a temperature gradient of 0.1 °C/s.

148 For the absolute quantification, standard curves were constructed using purified genomic DNA of  
149 type strains of *L. helveticus* LMG 6413, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *Lactis* LMG 7942, *S. thermophilus*  
150 LMG 6896 and *L. fermentum* LMG 6902, calculating *pheS* copy number as described in Bottari et  
151 al. (2013). The standard curves were constructed from serially 10-fold diluted reference strains  
152 DNA at known copy number, covering a dilution range of 6 orders (for *L. helveticus*, *L. delbrueckii*  
153 ssp. *lactis* and *S. thermophilus*) and 8 orders of magnitude as regards *L. fermentum*, then plotting

154 the resulting threshold cycles ( $C_q$ ), against the logarithm of the *pheS* copy number. The copy  
155 number of *pheS* gene of each species was calculated in the 91 whey samples by comparing the  $C_q$  of  
156 the sample with that of the respective standard curve.

#### 157 **2.4. Bacterial community profiling**

158 Bacterial diversity was evaluated in 34 samples: 17 NWS, of which 10 from the Conventional and 7  
159 from the Organic line, and the corresponding 17 cNAW. The V3-V4 region of the 16S rRNA gene  
160 was amplified and sequenced using primers and PCR conditions previously described in Takahashi  
161 et al. (2014). Library preparation and sequencing were carried out by BMR Genomics (Padova,  
162 Italy), on a MiSeq platform (Illumina Italy s.r.l., Milan, Italy), leading to 300 bp, paired-ends  
163 approach. The quality of the 16S rRNA amplicon raw reads was checked through FastQC  
164 (<https://www.bioinformatics.babraham.ac.uk/projects/fastqc/>). Using PrinSeq  
165 (<http://prinseq.sourceforge.net/>), raw reads shorter than 380 bp were discarded, and the bases with a  
166 Phred score below 20 were trimmed. Through FLASH (Magoč & Salzberg, 2011), paired-ends  
167 reads were joined. Merged sequences were then analysed using QIIME 1.9.1 software (Caporaso et  
168 al., 2010). The OTUs were picked at 99% of similarity using RDP classifier and the most  
169 representative sequences of each cluster were selected in order to assign taxonomy, using the  
170 Greengenes database (DeSantis et al., 2006). All samples were rarefied to 13500 reads per sample  
171 for subsequent analysis, to prevent any biases, due to different depths of sequencing. Alpha  
172 diversity indices (Observed species, Good's coverage, Chao1 richness and Shannon diversity index)  
173 were calculated using QIIME 1.9.1 version. In order to avoid biases due to different sequencing  
174 depths, all samples were rarefied at 13500 reads.

#### 175 **2.5. Statistical analysis**

176 All data obtained as absolute quantification of bacterial species were statistically elaborated using  
177 SPSS Statistics 21.0 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Student's *t*-test was used to assess statistical  
178 difference between quantities (significance level,  $p < 0.05$ ). Correlation coefficient among NWS

179 acidity and species abundance was evaluated by bivariate Pearson's correlation. Statistical  
180 significance between measured alpha-diversity indexes was evaluated through Student's *t*-test using  
181 QIIME.

### 182 **3. Results**

#### 183 **3.1. Absolute quantification**

184 The absolute abundances of the dominant species, *L. helveticus* and *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*, and  
185 the minor species, *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum*, were evaluated through a culture-independent  
186 approach, by qPCR assay. Calibration curves were used to assess the absolute abundances of these  
187 species in 91 samples. These belonged to two different production lines, Conventional and Organic,  
188 and were collected at different stages of PR cheese/NWS-making. qPCR data allowed to describe  
189 the mean values of the species detected in Conventional and Organic samples (Fig. 2). In detail, the  
190 NWS showed a predominance of *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* in both production lines ( $p < 0.001$ ), with  
191 a mean concentration of about  $7.35 \pm 0.53$  log copy n/mL in the Conventional line and  $7.39 \pm 0.44$   
192 log copy n/mL in the Organic one. *L. helveticus* showed a significant difference in terms of  
193 abundance ( $p < 0.05$ ) between Conventional and Organic NWS, with mean values of  $7.20 \pm 0.18$   
194 log copy n/mL and  $7.32 \pm 0.16$  log copy n/mL respectively. The different concentration of the  
195 bacterial species between the two NWS, despite statistical significance, is small and is not expected  
196 to affect the technological properties of NWS. The absolute amount of *S. thermophilus* was also  
197 statistically different ( $p < 0.001$ ) between the Conventional and the Organic NWS, with mean  
198 values of  $6.58 \pm 0.27$  log copy n/mL and  $5.98 \pm 1.09$  log copy n/mL respectively. Also in this case,  
199 the different measured amounts between the two NWS is not expected to have a biologically  
200 relevant effect. Regarding *L. fermentum*, different amounts were observed ( $p < 0.05$ ), in the  
201 Conventional and the Organic NWS, with mean values of  $1.73 \pm 0.73$  log copy n/mL and  $4.34 \pm$   
202  $0.37$  log copy n/mL, respectively. In the NAW samples, corresponding to the samples taken after  
203 the curdling, a decrease of the abundances of all the four analysed species was observed (Fig. 2).  
204 Considering both production lines, *L. helveticus* and *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* mean values were

205 6.41 ± 0.20 and 6.98 ± 0.42 log copy n/mL respectively, while *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum*  
206 abundances were 5.55 ± 0.98 and 3.33 ± 0.98 log copy n/mL respectively. After curd cooking, in  
207 cNAW, mean values of 6.39 ± 0.15, 7.74 ± 0.28, 5.53 ± 0.97 and 3.33 ± 0.95 log copy n/mL were  
208 observed for *L. helveticus*, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*, *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum*,  
209 respectively, for both production lines. Any statistical difference found between the Conventional  
210 and Organic lines for NWS samples was lost during the cheese-making process, with the exception  
211 of *L. fermentum*. This species shows significantly higher amounts ( $p < 0.05$ ) through the Organic  
212 production line.

213 To reveal the species behaviour under the acid stress occurring during the overnight incubation of  
214 the cNAW, the species abundances were then plotted against the measured NWS sample acidity. As  
215 shown in Fig. 3, *L. helveticus* seems to better adapt to the increasing acidity reached in some  
216 samples. Indeed, there is a positive correlation ( $p < 0.001$ ) between the NWS acidity and the copy  
217 number reached from this species (Fig. 3). The species *L. fermentum* shows a similar correlation  
218 trend (Fig. 3,  $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* shows a significantly negative  
219 correlation with increased acidity values, as well as *S. thermophilus* ( $p < 0.001$ ). It is noteworthy  
220 that, on average, Organic NWS samples showed higher acidity values when compared to  
221 Conventional ones, with average values of 28.95 ± 1.46 and 26.29 ± 1.99 °SH ( $p < 0.001$ )  
222 respectively.

223 The relative abundance of the four studied species in the 57 NWS was evaluated during the 10  
224 weeks sampling period (Fig. 4). *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* is the predominant species, but all the four  
225 LAB species showed variability across the period, especially in the Organic production line. It is  
226 noteworthy that, in the Conventional line, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* was the predominant species  
227 during all 10 weeks sampling time. (Fig. 4). On the other hand, in the Organic production line, *L.*  
228 *delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* represented the most abundant species in all the tested NWS in the first few  
229 weeks, while later on *L. helveticus* became the predominant species (Fig. 4). Considering the  
230 minority species, *S. thermophilus* was found in both the production lines at low concentrations, with

231 a lower variability over time in the Conventional line than in the Organic one. *L. fermentum* species  
232 was found to be less 1% in both production lines.

### 233 **3.2. 16S rRNA Gene High Troughput Sequencing**

234 A total of 3,727,122 raw reads were obtained after the sequencing step, of which 884,189 passed the  
235 filtering steps performed using QIIME software pipeline, with an average value of 26,006 reads per  
236 sample, and an average read length of 468 bp. For each sample, indices describing the alpha-  
237 diversity of the bacterial community were obtained and reported in Table 2.

238 A total of 102 OTUs were identified, of which only five have a relative abundance higher than 0.1  
239 % in at least five samples, as reported in Fig. 5 for Conventional and Organic samples. *L. helveticus*  
240 and *L. delbrueckii* were the major OTUs found in all analysed samples, with mean values of 50.5%  
241 and 34.2 %, respectively. Regarding Conventional samples, *L. delbrueckii* relative abundance  
242 ranged from 16.7% to 61.7%, while *L. helveticus* abundance ranged from 26.1% to 62.7% (Fig. 5).  
243 On the other hand, in samples from the Organic line, *L. delbrueckii* ranged from 3.9% to 58.2%  
244 while *L. helveticus* from 27.1% to 94.3%. The variability of *L. helveticus* was thus significantly  
245 higher in samples from the Organic line than in samples from the Conventional one (T-test,  $p <$   
246 0.05). *Streptococcus* ssp. was found in all samples, with values between 3.6% and 18.7% in the  
247 Conventional and 0.1% and 18.9% in the Organic one. As for other species, unidentified  
248 *Streptococcaceae* were below 3.8%, while unidentified *Lactobacillus* ssp. was found in all samples  
249 at less than 3%.

250 Interestingly, in most cNAW samples there is an increase in the relative abundance of *L. delbrueckii*  
251 compared to NWS. After cooking, *L. delbrueckii* average abundance shifts from  $18.9 \pm 16.1$  % to  
252  $40.0 \pm 15.9$ % (T-test,  $p < 0.05$ ) in the Organic samples, and from  $31.5 \pm 13.0$ % to  $43.6 \pm 12.2$ % in  
253 the Conventional ones. Instead, *L. helveticus* abundance is significantly lowered after the curd  
254 cooking step in the Conventional line samples, decreasing from  $51.5 \pm 11.6$ % to  $38.5 \pm 9.9$ % (T-

255 test,  $p < 0.05$ ). In the Organic production line, *L. helveticus* decreases from  $66.8 \pm 23.5\%$  to  $49.8 \pm$   
256  $20.5\%$ , after cooking.

257 The rarefaction analysis and the calculated diversity indexes show that there was a satisfactory  
258 coverage for all analysed samples (Table 2), and allowed to describe the diversity among the  
259 bacterial communities of the analysed samples. Samples belonging to the Conventional line show a  
260 significantly higher number of observed species ( $p < 0.001$ ), a significantly higher richness ( $p <$   
261  $0.05$ ), expressed by Chao1 index, as well as a higher diversity among the samples (Shannon index,  
262  $p < 0.001$ ), when compared to samples belonging to the Organic line.

263 The diversity indexes vary according to the exposure to the cooking step, indeed cNAW samples  
264 show significantly higher observed species and an increased species richness ( $p < 0.001$ ) compared  
265 to NWS samples. Conversely, the species diversity (Shannon index) is not affected by the cooking  
266 step.

#### 267 **4. Discussion**

268 Nowadays it is increasingly common to study microbial communities using high-throughput  
269 sequencing technology which, giving the relative abundance at taxon level in an approach referred  
270 to as metataxonomics (Marchesi & Ravel, 2015), allows to achieve an overview of the community  
271 composition (De Filippis et al., 2018; De Filippis et al., 2017; Widder et al., 2016). Still, in order to  
272 estimate the community dynamics in complex bacterial cultures under technological selective  
273 pressures, more detailed information are necessary, such as the absolute quantification (Berry &  
274 Widder, 2014; Philippot et al., 2009). To our knowledge, this is the first study aiming to investigate  
275 the complexity of NWS used in PR cheese-making, focusing on both the absolute and relative  
276 abundance of bacterial species and on the modification of this bacterial community under  
277 environmental and technological pressures. A combined approach, using qPCR assay and  
278 metataxonomic analysis, was carried out to investigate the bacterial dynamics of 91 whey samples  
279 collected during different steps of PR cheese-making, in one dairy plant, through two different lines  
280 of production, one Conventional and one Organic, over a 10 weeks period. Through qPCR, the 57

281 collected NWS showed a higher abundance of *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* over *L. helveticus*,  
282 differently from what consistently reported in the literature regarding PR NWS, that observes an  
283 opposite distribution of the two thermophilic species (Cocconcelli et al., 1997; Coppola et al., 2000;  
284 Gatti et al., 2003, 2004). On the other hand, our data are consistent with Bottari et al. (2010) who,  
285 through culture-independent approaches, found a high variability among the considered NWS, with  
286 several samples showing comparable percentages of *L. helveticus* and *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*.  
287 Nevertheless, the presently observed “inverted ratio”, could be a peculiarity of the chosen dairy  
288 plant, since the intrinsically artisanal nature of the NWS leads to a great variability among the  
289 samples of different PR manufacturers (Bottari et al., 2010; Gatti et al., 2004). qPCR assay revealed  
290 also the presence of minor species, particularly *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum*, in all the 91  
291 samples, in agreement with observation of other authors (Alessandria et al., 2016; Benedetta Bottari  
292 et al., 2013; De Filippis et al., 2014). In the present study, *S. thermophilus* amount was higher than  
293 previously observed in PR NWS (Bottari et al., 2010), but this could be due to the limit of detection  
294 of the culture-independent approaches formerly used. *L. fermentum* species was found at low  
295 concentration (<1%) in all the samples. Recently, it has been demonstrated that this species is able  
296 to survive throughout the ripening in a dairy product with a similar cheese-making technology,  
297 representing a fraction of the metabolically active microbial population in the advanced stages of  
298 ripening (Levante et al., 2017).

299 Nowadays, consumers have oriented their purchase preferences toward organic products, with the  
300 attitude that organic dairy farming is kinder to the environment, animals, and people (Schwendel et  
301 al., 2014a). Despite the existence of compositional difference between organic and conventional  
302 milk is reported (Schwendel et al., 2014a; Schwendel et al., 2014b), only one study has assessed if  
303 this affected microbial composition, by measuring differences in the aerobic spore-forming bacteria  
304 (Coorevits et al., 2008). To our knowledge, there are no indications on how the different cow  
305 feeding might affect the LAB microbiota of Conventional or Organic milk that daily interacts with  
306 the NWS. In the present study, the absolute abundances of the target species in NWS were found to

307 be significantly different comparing samples from Conventional or Organic production lines, but  
308 the observed differences are small and probably not relevant on the technological processes. These  
309 differences are subsequently flattened in response to the technological treatments, which are mainly  
310 represented by the curdling process, followed by the breaking step and the cooking step. The only  
311 species that seems to be unaffected is *L. fermentum*, that represents a minority one. These data  
312 could suggest that NWS samples, regardless of their initial different composition, respond stably  
313 following the treatments. The technological process, in particular the addition of NWS to milk, the  
314 curdling, breaking and cooking steps are probably the selective pressures that shape the structure of  
315 this natural starter culture. It is well known that weak changes due to seasonal variations or  
316 technological parameters modifications, such as differences in the acidity and pH, could affect the  
317 bacterial consortium present in NWS (Gatti et al., 2014; Rossetti et al., 2008; Santarelli et al.,  
318 2008). In good agreement with literature, our results showed a high degree of variability of *L.*  
319 *helveticus* and *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* in both the production lines, over the ten weeks. The  
320 minority species, such as *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum* were detected in low concentrations  
321 both in Conventional and Organic production lines, appearing to be more stable over the analysed  
322 period. Despite their low abundance in the NWS and in the first cheese-making steps, these species  
323 could be involved in the following stages of production and ripening (Bottari et al., 2010; Gatti et  
324 al., 2014).

325 Studies performed on NWS used for the manufacturing of other cheeses have shown how these  
326 undefined cultures, characterized by a low complexity LAB community, can still harbour a certain  
327 degree of strain-level diversity. This observation was recently described in various types of NWS  
328 for the species *Lactococcus lactis* (Frantzen, Kleppen, & Holo, 2018), *Leuconostoc mesenteroides*  
329 (Frantzen et al., 2017), and *L. helveticus* (Schmid et al., 2018; Somerville et al., 2019).

330 Previous studies have highlighted that NWS species and biotypes show different ability to adapt to  
331 the curd ecosystem and to evolve during cheese ripening (Giraffa & Neviani, 1999). Recently,  
332 Moser et al. (2018) have shown how NWS used for the production of Gruyère-type cheese were



333 characterized by a multi-strain population of *L. helveticus*, and that different strains are capable to  
334 coexist and persist dynamically through a prolonged ripening time. The growing efforts on  
335 characterization of NWS underline the importance of a deeper understanding of composition of the  
336 bacterial community to maintain culture diversity and performance.

337 Regarding the relative composition of the bacterial community, the calculated alpha indices show  
338 that the two production lines have different communities, although dominated by the main  
339 acidifying thermophilic species, in good agreement with other studies (Bottari et al., 2010; De  
340 Filippis et al., 2014; Giraffa et al., 1996). Indeed, exposure to thermal stress does not lead to a  
341 significant reduction of the Shannon index, since the NWS is already dominated by few  
342 thermophilic species that are only slightly affected by the cooking temperature. Interestingly, the  
343 variations observed in terms of absolute abundances of *L. helveticus* and *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* in  
344 response to thermal and acid stress, show some differences with the relative abundance results  
345 obtained from metataxonomic analysis. However, the sole metataxonomic analysis fails to depict if  
346 the observed change in the relative abundance of *L. helveticus* is due to an increased number of *L.*  
347 *delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*, or to a progressive loss of viability of the *L. helveticus* itself. The analysis of  
348 quantitative data obtained through qPCR about *L. helveticus* and *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* in NAW  
349 suggests that both the species quickly adapt to the vat environment. *L. helveticus* quantity decreases  
350 in NAW compared to NWS, due to the dilution of the NWS into the vat milk, and remains mostly  
351 unchanged after the cooking step. On the other hand, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis* abundance is less  
352 affected by dilution in vat milk, and increases after the cooking step. This increase suggests that this  
353 species better resists to thermal treatment. cNAW samples composition is different, in terms of  
354 species abundance, from the starting NWS. After curd extraction, the cNAW left in the vat, that has  
355 undergone the thermal stress imposed by the cooking temperature, is cooled down overnight,  
356 passing through temperatures that represent the optimum range (37 °-42 °C) for the thermophilic  
357 LAB. By this process the cNAW becomes the NWS ready for the cheese-making of the following  
358 day. The data obtained, in agreement with other works (Chamba, 2000; Cocconcelli et al., 1997;

359 Neviani, Divizia, Abbiati, & Gatti, 1995), suggest that the most abundant species present in the  
360 whey appear to respond differently to temperature gradients and to the different composition of the  
361 environment (i.e. vat milk under heating or cNAW under acidification) during cheese/NWS-  
362 making. Indeed, *L. helveticus* is regarded as a more acid-tolerant species, and this might explain  
363 why this species could increase in number after the overnight incubation of the cNAW, when  
364 acidity quickly increases. Indeed, there is a positive correlation between NWS acidity and the  
365 abundance of *L. helveticus* measured in the samples. Conversely, the inoculated vat milk has higher  
366 pH values (of about 6.0) that, in combination with a possibly higher tolerance to the thermal stress  
367 of *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*, might explain the numerical increase of this species in NAW and  
368 cNAW.

## 369 **5. Conclusions**

370 This work provides a description of the natural starter cultures microbiota involved in Parmigiano  
371 Reggiano PDO Italian cheese-making over time and in response to different technological pressures  
372 during its production. Whey samples from one PR dairy plant, during 10 weeks, in two different  
373 production lines, Conventional and Organic, were studied throughout cheese/NWS-making. The  
374 combination of quantitative results obtained with qPCR and HTS highlighted that NWS used for the  
375 production of PR cheese is a dynamic microbial community. The microbiota adapts to the different  
376 technological parameters encountered in the cheese/NWS manufacturing process, while retaining a  
377 high level of resilience of the thermophilic LAB species mainly involved in the steps of curd  
378 acidification and the early maturation process. The peculiar adaptive features of the main  
379 thermophilic species of NWS allows this undefined culture to retain its technological function, by  
380 adapting to a cyclical production process based on back-slopping. The flattening of the observed  
381 differences in bacterial species diversity between Organic and Conventional NWS after the cooking  
382 step, confirms that the microbiota of NWS, regardless of its initial different composition, is shaped  
383 by technological treatments.

## 384 **Funding information**

385 This research received no specific grant for any funding agency in the public commercial, or not-  
386 for-profit sectors.

387 **Declaration of interest**

388 The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

389 **Acknowledgements**

390 The authors are grateful to cheese factory Ferrarini Silvestro & C. (SNC) for providing the samples  
391 and to Fabio Spataro and Fausto Pagani for informatics support. This research benefits from the  
392 HPC (High Performance Computing) facility of the University of Parma, Italy.

393

394 **References**

- 395 Alessandria, V., Ferrocino, I., De Filippis, F., Fontana, M., Rantsiou, K., Ercolini, D., & Cocolin, L.  
396 (2016). Microbiota of an Italian Grana-Like Cheese during Manufacture and Ripening ,  
397 Unraveled by 16S rRNA-Based Approaches. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*,  
398 82(13), 3988–3995. <https://doi.org/10.1128/AEM.00999-16>.Editor
- 399 Berry, D., & Widder, S. (2014). Deciphering microbial interactions and detecting keystone species  
400 with co-occurrence networks. *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 5(5),  
401 219.<https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2014.00219>
- 402 Bottari, B., Santarelli, M., Neviani, E., & Gatti, M. (2010). Natural whey starter for Parmigiano  
403 Reggiano: culture-independent approach. *Journal of Applied Microbiology*, 108(5), 1676–  
404 1684. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2672.2009.04564.x>
- 405 Bottari, B., Agrimonti, C., Gatti, M., Neviani, E., & Marmiroli, N. (2013). Development of a  
406 multiplex real time PCR to detect thermophilic lactic acid bacteria in natural whey starters.  
407 *International Journal of Food Microbiology*, 160(3), 290–  
408 297.<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijfoodmicro.2012.10.011>
- 409 Caporaso, J. G., Kuczynski, J., Stombaugh, J., Bittinger, K., Bushman, F. D., Costello, E. K., &  
410 Knight, R. (2010). QIIME allows analysis of high-throughput community sequencing data.  
411 *Nature Methods*, 7(5), 335-336. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nmeth.f.303>
- 412 Chamba, J. (2000). L’Emmental, an écosystème complexe. Conséquences sur la sélection et  
413 l’utilisation des ferments. *Sciences Des Aliments*, 20, 37–54.  
414 <https://doi.org/10.1051/lait:2004036>
- 415 Cocconcelli, P. S., Parisi, M. G., Senini, L., & Bottazzi, V. (1997). Use of RAPD and 16S rDNA  
416 sequencing for the study of *Lactobacillus* population dynamics in natural whey culture. *Letters*  
417 *in Applied Microbiology*, 25(1), 8–12. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1472-765X.1997.00061.x>

418 Coorevits, A., De Jonghe, V., Vandroemme, J., Reekmans, R., Heyrman, J., Messens, W., &  
419 Heyndrickx, M. (2008). Comparative analysis of the diversity of aerobic spore-forming  
420 bacteria in raw milk from organic and conventional dairy farms. *Systematic and Applied*  
421 *Microbiology*, 31(2), 126–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.syapm.2008.03.002>

422 Coppola, R., Nanni, M., Iorizo, M., Sorrentino, A., Sorrentino, E., Chiavari, C., & Grazia, L.  
423 (2000). Microbiological characteristics of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese during the  
424 cheesemaking and the first months of the ripening. *Le Lait*, 80(5), 479–490.  
425 <https://doi.org/10.1051/lait:2000139>

426 De Dea Lindner, J., Bernini, V., De Lorentiis, A., Pecorari, A., Neviani, E., & Gatti, M. (2008).  
427 Parmigiano Reggiano cheese: evolution of cultivable and total lactic microflora and peptidase  
428 activities during manufacture and ripening. *Dairy Science and Technology*, 88(4-5), 511–523.  
429 <https://doi.org/10.1051/dst:2008019>

430 De Filippis, F., La Storia, A., Stellato, G., Gatti, M., & Ercolini, D. (2014). A selected core  
431 microbiome drives the early stages of three popular italian cheese manufactures. *PloS One*,  
432 9(2), e89680. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0089680>

433 De Filippis, F., Parente, E., & Ercolini, D. (2017). Metagenomics insights into food fermentations.  
434 *Microbial Biotechnology*, 10(1), 91-102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1751-7915.12421>

435 De Filippis, F., Parente, E., & Ercolini, D. (2018). Recent Past, Present, and Future of the Food  
436 Microbiome. *Annual Review of Food Science and Technology*, 9, 589–608,  
437 <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-food-030117-012312>

438 DeSantis, T. Z., Hugenholtz, P., Larsen, N., Rojas, M., Brodie, E. L., Keller, K., & Andersen, G. L.  
439 (2006). Greengenes, a chimera-checked 16S rRNA gene database and workbench compatible  
440 with ARB. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, 72(7), 5069–  
441 5072. <https://doi.org/10.1128/AEM.03006-05>

- 442 Erkus, O., De Jager, V. C. L., Spus, M., Van Alen-Boerrigter, I. J., Van Rijswijck, I. M. H.,  
443 Hazelwood, L., & Smid, E. J. (2013). Multifactorial diversity sustains microbial community  
444 stability. *ISME Journal*, 7(11), 2126–2136. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ismej.2013.108>
- 445 Frantzen, C. A., Kleppen, H. P., & Holo, H. (2018). *Lactococcus lactis* diversity in undefined  
446 mixed dairy starter cultures as revealed by comparative genome analyses and targeted  
447 amplicon sequencing of *epsD*. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, 84(3), 1–15.  
448 <https://doi.org/10.1128/AEM.02199-17>
- 449 Frantzen, C. A., Kot, W., Pedersen, T. B., Ardö, Y. M., Broadbent, J. R., Neve, H., Hansen, L. H.,  
450 Dal Bello, F., Ostlie, H.M, Kleppen, H. P., Vogensen F.K., & Holo, H. (2017). Genomic  
451 characterization of dairy associated *Leuconostoc* species and diversity of leuconostocs in  
452 undefined mixed mesophilic starter cultures. *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 8(2).  
453 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2017.00132>
- 454 Gatti, M., Bottari, B., Lazzi, C., Neviani, E., & Mucchetti, G. (2014). Invited review: Microbial  
455 evolution in raw-milk, long-ripened cheeses produced using undefined natural whey starters.  
456 *Journal of Dairy Science*, 97(2), 573–591. <https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.2013-7187>
- 457 Gatti, M., De Dea Lindner, J., De Lorentiis, A., Bottari, B., Santarelli, M., Bernini, V., & Neviani,  
458 E. (2008). Dynamics of whole and lysed bacterial cells during Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese  
459 production and ripening. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, 74(19), 6161–6167.  
460 <https://doi.org/10.1128/AEM.00871-08>
- 461 Gatti, M., Lazzi, C., Rossetti, L., Mucchetti, G., & Neviani, E. (2003). Biodiversity in *Lactobacillus*  
462 *helveticus* strains present in natural whey starter used for Parmigiano Reggiano cheese.  
463 *Journal of Applied Microbiology*, 95(3), 463–470. [https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-](https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2672.2003.01997.x)  
464 [2672.2003.01997.x](https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2672.2003.01997.x)
- 465 Gatti, M., Trivisano, C., Fabrizi, E., Neviani, E., & Gardini, F. (2004). Biodiversity among

466 *Lactobacillus helveticus* strains isolated from different natural whey starter cultures as revealed  
467 by classification trees. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, 70(1), 182–190.

468 Giraffa, G., Andrighetto, C., Antonello, C., Gatti, M., Lazzi, C., Marcazzan, G., & Neviani, E.  
469 (2004). Genotypic and phenotypic diversity of *Lactobacillus delbrueckii* subsp. *lactis* strains of  
470 dairy origin. *International Journal of Food Microbiology*, 91(2), 129–139.  
471 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0168-1605\(03\)00368-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0168-1605(03)00368-4)

472 Giraffa, G., Mucchetti, G., & Neviani, E. (1996). Interactions among thermophilic lactobacilli  
473 during growth in cheese whey. *Journal of Applied Bacteriology*, 80(2), 199–202.  
474 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2672.1996.tb03210.x>

475 Giraffa, G., & Neviani, E. (1999). Different *Lactobacillus helveticus* strain populations dominate  
476 during Grana Padano cheesemaking. *Food Microbiology*, 16(2), 205–210.  
477 <https://doi.org/10.1006/fmic.1998.0230>

478 Giraffa, G., Gatti, M., Rossetti, L., Senini, L., & Neviani, E. (2000). Molecular diversity within  
479 *Lactobacillus helveticus* as revealed by genotypic characterization. *Applied and Environmental*  
480 *Microbiology*, 66(4), 1259–1265. <https://doi.org/10.1128/AEM.66.4.1259-1265.2000>

481 Gobbetti, M., Neviani, E., & Fox, P. (2018). *The Cheeses of Italy: Science and Technology*.  
482 Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89854-4>

483 Iezzi, R., Locci, F., Ghiglietti, R., Belingheri, C., Francolino, S., & Mucchetti, G. (2012).  
484 Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano cheese curd grains size and distribution by image  
485 analysis. *LWT - Food Science and Technology*, 47(2), 380–385.  
486 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lwt.2012.01.035>

487 Johnson, M. E. (2013). Mesophilic and Thermophilic Cultures Used in Traditional Cheesemaking.  
488 *Microbiology Spectrum*, 1(1), 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1128/microbiolspec.cm-0004-12>

489 Levante, A., De Filippis, F., La Storia, A., Gatti, M., Neviani, E., Ercolini, D., & Lazzi, C. (2017).

- 490 Metabolic gene-targeted monitoring of non-starter lactic acid bacteria during cheese ripening.  
491 *International Journal of Food Microbiology*, 257, 276–284.  
492 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijfoodmicro.2017.07.002>
- 493 Lombardi, A., Maistro, L. D., De Dea, P., Gatti, M., Giraffa, G., & Neviani, E. (2002). A  
494 polyphasic approach to highlight genotypic and phenotypic diversities of *Lactobacillus*  
495 *helveticus* strains isolated from dairy starter cultures and cheeses. *The Journal of Dairy*  
496 *Research*, 69(1), 139–149. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022029901005349>
- 497 Magoč, T., & Salzberg, S. L. (2011). FLASH: Fast length adjustment of short reads to improve  
498 genome assemblies. *Bioinformatics*, 27(21), 2957–2963.  
499 <https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btr507>
- 500 Marchesi, J. R., & Ravel, J. (2015). The vocabulary of microbiome research: a proposal.  
501 *Microbiome*, 3(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40168-015-0094-5>
- 502 Moser, A., Schafroth, K., Meile, L., Egger, L., Badertscher, R., & Imler, S. (2018). Population  
503 dynamics of *Lactobacillus helveticus* in Swiss Gruyère-type cheese manufactured with natural  
504 whey cultures. *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 9(4), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2018.00637>
- 505 Mucchetti, G., & Neviani, E. (2006). *Microbiologia e tecnologia lattiero-casearia*. Tecniche nuove.
- 506 Neviani, E., Divizia, R., Abbiati, E., & Gatti, M. (1995). Acidification activity of thermophilic  
507 lactobacilli under the temperature gradient of Grana cheese making. *Journal of Dairy Science*,  
508 78(6), 1248–1252. [https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.s0022-0302\(95\)76744-3](https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.s0022-0302(95)76744-3)
- 509 Philippot, L., Čuhel, J., Saby, N. P. A., Chèneby, D., Chroňáková, A., Bru, D., & Šimek, M. (2009).  
510 Mapping field-scale spatial patterns of size and activity of the denitrifier community.  
511 *Environmental Microbiology*, 11(6), 1518–1526. [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1462-](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1462-2920.2009.01879.x)  
512 [2920.2009.01879.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1462-2920.2009.01879.x)
- 513 Rossetti, L., Fornasari, M. E., Gatti, M., Lazzi, C., Neviani, E., & Giraffa, G. (2008). Grana Padano



514 cheese whey starters : Microbial composition and strain distribution. *International Journal of*  
515 *Food Microbiology*, 127(1-2), 168–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijfoodmicro.2008.06.005>

516 Santarelli, M., Gatti, M., Lazzi, C., Bernini, V., Zapparoli, G. A., & Neviani, E. (2008). Whey  
517 Starter for Grana Padano Cheese : Effect of Technological Parameters on Viability and  
518 Composition of the Microbial Community. *Journal of Dairy Science*, 91(3), 883–891.  
519 <https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.2007-0296>

520 Schmid, M., Muri, J., Melidis, D., Varadarajan, A. R., Somerville, V., Wicki, A., Moser A.,  
521 Bourqui M., Wenzel C., Eugster-Meier E., Frey J. E., Irmmler S., & Ahrens, C. H. (2018).  
522 Comparative genomics of completely sequenced *Lactobacillus helveticus* genomes provides  
523 insights into strain-specific genes and resolves metagenomics data down to the strain level.  
524 *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 9(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2018.00063>

525 Schwendel, B. H., Wester, T. J., Morel, P. C. H., Tavendale, M. H., Deadman, C., Shadbolt, N. M.,  
526 & Otter, D. E. (2014a). Invited review: Organic and conventionally produced milk—An  
527 evaluation of factors influencing milk composition. *Journal of Dairy Science*, 98(2), 721–746.  
528 <https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.2014-8389>

529 Schwendel, B. H., Morel, P. C. H., Wester, T. J., Tavendale, M. H., Deadman, C., Fong, B., &  
530 Otter, D. E. (2014b). Fatty acid profile differs between organic and conventionally produced  
531 cow milk independent of season or milking time. *Journal of Dairy Science*, 98(3), 1411–1425.  
532 <https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.2014-8322>

533 Somerville, V., Lutz, S., Schmid, M., Frei, D., Moser, A., Irmmler, S., Ahrens, C. H. (2019). Long-  
534 read based de novo assembly of low-complexity metagenome samples results in finished  
535 genomes and reveals insights into strain diversity and an active phage system. *BMC*  
536 *Microbiology*, 19(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12866-019-1500-0>

537 Takahashi, S., Tomita, J., Nishioka, K., Hisada, T., & Nishijima, M. (2014). Development of a

538 prokaryotic universal primer for simultaneous analysis of Bacteria and Archaea using next-  
539 generation sequencing. *PLoS ONE*, 9(8). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0105592>

540 Widder, S., Allen, R. J., Pfeiffer, T., Curtis, T. P., Wiuf, C., Sloan, W. T., & Wilmes, P. (2016).  
541 Challenges in microbial ecology: Building predictive understanding of community function  
542 and dynamics. *ISME Journal*, 10(11), 2557–2568. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ismej.2016.45>

543

544 **Figure captions**

545 **Figure 1.** Schematic representation of the cheese/NWS-making process and the whey sampling  
546 points. NWS: Natural whey starter, NAW: non-acidified whey, cNAW: cooked non-acidified whey.

547 **Figure 2.** Boxplot of the absolute quantification of the species *L. helveticus*, *L. delbrueckii* ssp.  
548 *lactis*, *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum* in the different samples collected: natural whey starters  
549 (NWS), non-acidified whey (NAW) and cooked non-acidified whey (cNAW). \* Statistically  
550 significant difference,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* Statistically significant difference,  $p < 0.001$

551 **Figure 3.** Linear correlation between the bacterial counts measured in NWS samples and the  
552 corresponding acidity, measured in Soxhlet-Henkel degrees ( $^{\circ}$ SH). The panels represent the trend of  
553 the species *L. helveticus*, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*, *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum* in the  
554 different samples collected. Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) is reported at the bottom of each  
555 graph, statistical significance is shown (\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ).

556 **Figure 4.** Average distribution of the relative abundance (expressed as percentage) of the species *L.*  
557 *helveticus*, *L. delbrueckii* ssp. *lactis*, *S. thermophilus* and *L. fermentum* during the 10 weeks  
558 sampling.

559 **Figure 5.** Incidence of OTUs based on 16S rRNA gene of acid and cooked whey samples belonging  
560 to Conventional or Organic production lines. The NWS and cNAW (CON- for Conventional and  
561 ORG- for Organic line, respectively) samples from the same date are shown next to each other. The  
562 bar graph describes the relative abundance of each species. Only the OTUs whose abundance is  
563 higher than 0.1% in at least 90% of the samples are reported, the remaining OTUs are grouped in  
564 the category "Others".

565

566 **Tables**

567 **Table 1:** Primer pairs used in this study; the sequences are the same as reported in Bottari et al.,  
568 2010.

<b>Primer</b>	<b>Primer sequence (5'→3')</b>	<b>Length (bp)</b>	<b>Size (bp)</b>	<b>GC%</b>
LlpheSF	ACGTTGACGCTGACCACC	18	51	60
LlpheSR	GGCTTGAAGTGGTGAAGTCTG	21		
StpheSF	GAAGAAATCTTGCTTCGCACTC	22	50	46
StpheSR	AGTGTACGAGCTTGGACAGGA	21		
LfpheSF	CTACGTGACCCCGTCTGTTT	20	76	58
LfpheSR	GAAGTCGTGTTGTTCCAGCA	20		
LhpheSF	TTGATGGTGAAGACTTGCTTAGAA	24	51	45
LhpheSR	CTCTGGCTTGGTCACCTGAA	20		

569

570

571 **Table 2:** Observed species, Chao 1 and Shannon indexes and estimated sample coverage for 16S  
572 rRNA amplicons from NWS (Natural whey starter) and cNAW (cooked non-acidified whey)  
573 samples. All data are reported as mean  $\pm$  S.D.

Sample Type	Description	Observed species	Chao1	Shannon	Good's coverage
<b>NWS</b>	Conv-7/9	19.7 $\pm$ 2.58	43.85 $\pm$ 16.96	1.49 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-27/9	23 $\pm$ 3.27	54.63 $\pm$ 27.6	1.86 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-18/9	23.3 $\pm$ 2.45	58.13 $\pm$ 27.99	1.78 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-31/8	20.8 $\pm$ 3.01	55.45 $\pm$ 31.54	1.84 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-4/8	27.6 $\pm$ 2.88	68.35 $\pm$ 33.8	1.79 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-7/8	19 $\pm$ 2.58	38.88 $\pm$ 19.53	1.82 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-16/8	22.8 $\pm$ 3.65	53.72 $\pm$ 28.9	1.76 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-23/8	17.2 $\pm$ 1.81	29.45 $\pm$ 10.2	1.87 $\pm$ 0.01	1 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-13/9	23.6 $\pm$ 3.86	58.09 $\pm$ 33.29	1.85 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-6/10	28 $\pm$ 2.4	60.18 $\pm$ 13.35	1.88 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-7/9	23.6 $\pm$ 2.12	49.48 $\pm$ 16.82	1.08 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-29/9	19.1 $\pm$ 1.2	31.99 $\pm$ 9.22	0.74 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-1/9	20.5 $\pm$ 1.65	31.33 $\pm$ 10.59	1.99 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-8/8	17.1 $\pm$ 1.73	31.45 $\pm$ 11.66	1.64 $\pm$ 0.01	1 $\pm$ 0
	Org-16/8	16.1 $\pm$ 1.6	23.05 $\pm$ 6.32	2 $\pm$ 0.01	1 $\pm$ 0
	Org-23/8	20 $\pm$ 0	34 $\pm$ 0	1.87 $\pm$ 0	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-10/10	15.1 $\pm$ 2.33	33.1 $\pm$ 20.14	0.47 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
<b>cNAW</b>	Conv-7/9	44.3 $\pm$ 4.45	101.17 $\pm$ 39.71	1.7 $\pm$ 0.01	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-27/9	47.1 $\pm$ 3.14	92.59 $\pm$ 29.88	1.87 $\pm$ 0.02	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-18/9	31.3 $\pm$ 2.75	51.49 $\pm$ 16.29	1.68 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-31/8	67.4 $\pm$ 3.57	112.9 $\pm$ 30.94	2.19 $\pm$ 0.02	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-4/8	66 $\pm$ 4.71	115.99 $\pm$ 17.85	2.53 $\pm$ 0.01	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-7/8	63.4 $\pm$ 5.93	126.34 $\pm$ 39.09	2.04 $\pm$ 0.01	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-16/8	65.9 $\pm$ 4.07	104.96 $\pm$ 17.7	1.93 $\pm$ 0.01	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-23/8	38.5 $\pm$ 6.57	108.66 $\pm$ 37.1	1.81 $\pm$ 0.01	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-13/9	57.1 $\pm$ 3.31	108.37 $\pm$ 36.78	1.96 $\pm$ 0.01	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Conv-6/10	79 $\pm$ 3.8	179.25 $\pm$ 54.5	2.19 $\pm$ 0.01	0.997 $\pm$ 0
	Org-7/9	24.5 $\pm$ 4.77	63.14 $\pm$ 38.77	1.47 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-29/9	34.9 $\pm$ 5.24	90.42 $\pm$ 76.19	1.16 $\pm$ 0.01	0.998 $\pm$ 0
	Org-1/9	25.5 $\pm$ 3.44	71.52 $\pm$ 54.04	1.7 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-8/8	26.7 $\pm$ 3.02	62.99 $\pm$ 27.72	1.86 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-16/8	27.6 $\pm$ 1.84	65.17 $\pm$ 17.48	1.86 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-23/8	26.1 $\pm$ 3.54	89.95 $\pm$ 62.83	1.76 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0
	Org-10/10	30.6 $\pm$ 4.09	80.99 $\pm$ 28.54	1.01 $\pm$ 0.01	0.999 $\pm$ 0

574