

NEW YORK



Where the Water Buffalo Roam

Rome's Obikà mozzarella bar makes a move to Manhattan.

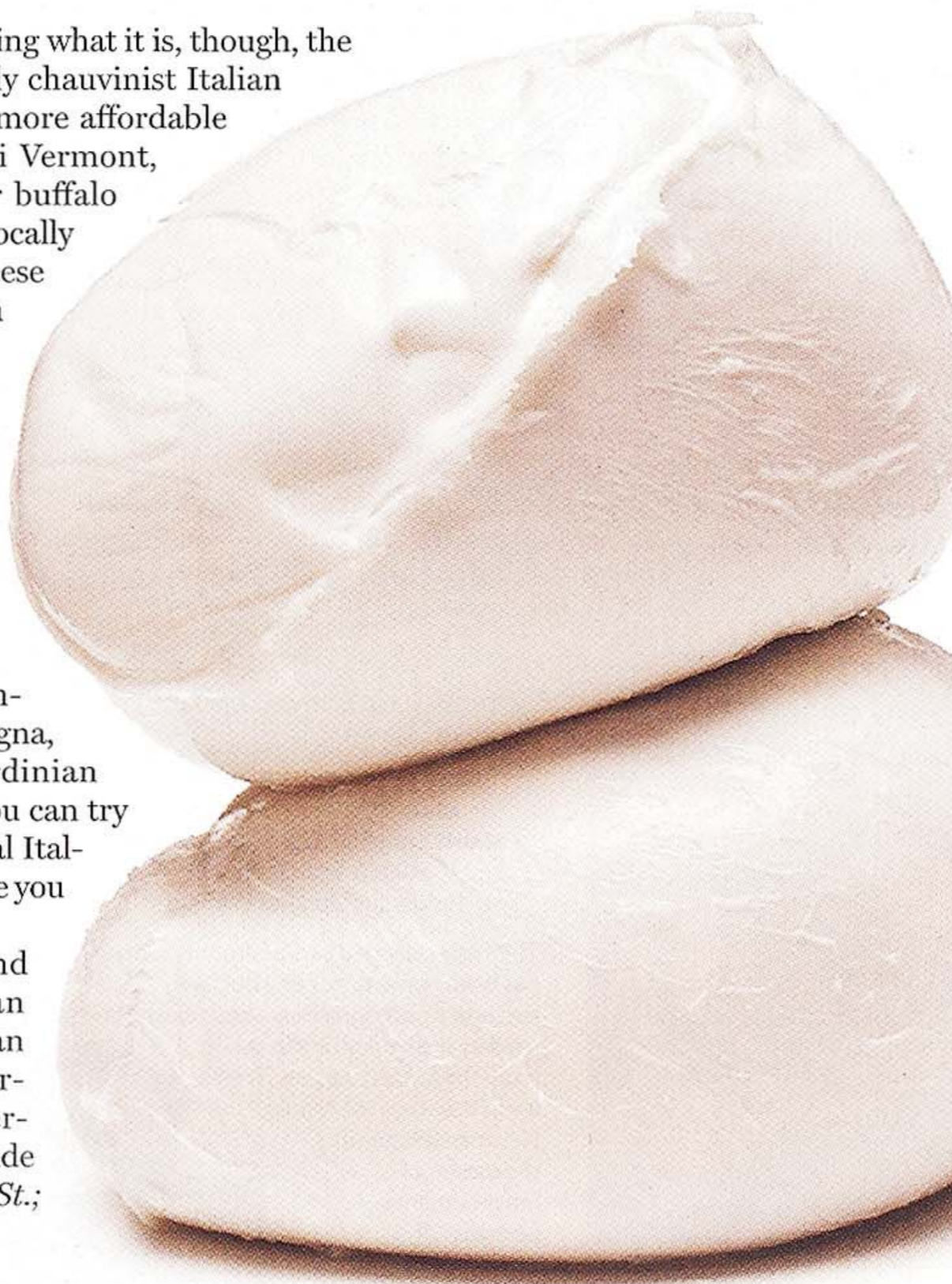
BY ROBIN RAISFELD AND ROB PATRONITE

FRESH MOZZARELLA has long been a star of the Italian table, oozing out onto antipasto plates and melting in discrete dabs on pizza Margherita. But no place fetishizes the milky white blobs as much as Obikà, the proliferating chainlet of mozzarella bars founded four years ago in Rome by Silvio Ursini, an executive at Bulgari. The jewelry connection is no accident: Obikà is known for displaying its authentic Neapolitan cheese in glass tanks, like exceedingly perishable objets d'art, and borrows from the Japanese sushi-bar tradition in its presentation and aesthetics. ("Obikà" is a slight modification on an expression in the Neapolitan dialect for "Here it is!")

After expanding to Milan, London, and Turin, with plans in the pipeline for Kuwait City and Tokyo, the brand makes its American debut next week. The sleek Italian-fabricated kiosk, which has taken up residence in the IBM Building atrium, is a joint venture between the Italian company and New York entrepreneur Reto Cantone, who'd previously operated a L'Espresso kiosk on the very same spot. It will be open throughout the day for Italian pastries, salads, antipasti, and pasta, but the main draw is the mozzarella di bufala DOP, flown in fresh twice or thrice weekly from Campania.

With the exchange rate being what it is, though, the partners broke from typically chauvinist Italian culinary tradition to add a more affordable American option: Bufala di Vermont, made from a herd of water buffalo whose milk is also used for locally made yogurt and an aged cheese called Ravello. The Italian buffalo mozzarella, in plain and smoked versions, comes from Paestum, outside of Naples, and all three can be ordered by the buffalo mozzarella connoisseur as part of an \$18 tasting, for the ultimate creamy, cheesy throwdown. Obikà proudly showcases other Italian imports like mortadella di Bologna, Sicilian caponata, and Sardinian pane carasau. For dessert, you can try a small tiramisù ("the original Italian recipe," the menu will have you know).

Once the place is up and running, the partners plan to expand to other American cities, spreading the water-buffalo gospel and the overnighted milky orbs far and wide (590 Madison Ave., at 56th St.; 212-355-2217).



Buying Domestic

It used to be that mozzarella di bufala and burrata had to be flown in overnight from Campania or Puglia. Not anymore.



BUBALUS BUBALIS MOZZARELLA DI BUFALA

Latin for water buffalo, the name of this West Coast brand is as much fun to say as the cheese is to eat. It's made from the milk of contented Northern California water buffalos, and available sporadically at the new Avenue C foodie haven, Barnyard (\$10). There are those aficionados who believe that a pizza Margherita isn't a pizza Margherita unless it's anointed with judicious dots of real mozzarella di bufala. It's a sentiment shared by New York's own number-one pieman, Una Pizza Napoletana's Anthony Mangieri, who uses the Bubalus Bubalis brand at his East Village pizzeria (Barnyard, 149 Avenue C., nr. 9th St.; 212-674-2276).



DI BRUNO BROS. BURRATA

A superb burrata (a fresh mozzarella pouch of sorts filled with mozzarella curds and cream) handmade at this great old Philadelphia cheese shop. Jonathan Benno is a fan (he serves it at Per Se), and so is Anne Saxelby of Saxelby Cheesemongers, who receives fresh shipments every Friday (\$11.99). The burrata is wrapped in leek leaves, which traditionally served as a safety seal of sorts: If the leaves had begun to yellow, you knew the cheese was past its expiration date. It might be the best thing to come out of Philly since the cheesesteak (120 Essex St., nr. Delancey St.; 212-228-8204).



BUFALA DI VERMONT MOZZARELLA DI BUFALA

You might know this pioneering creamery by its former name (Woodstock Water Buffalo) and its tangy water-buffalo yogurt. It's also the source for terrific mozzarella di bufala made from the milk of a free-roaming, grass-and-hay-fed herd that, according to the brochure, sleeps on waterbeds. (Served at Obikà, and available at bufaladivermont.com; \$30 for four.)