

The New York Times

Mozzarella, an Unlikely Star, Opens in Midtown

By JILL SANTOPIETRO

OBIKÀ is how Neapolitans say “here it is.” “It’s about time,” New Yorkers might respond.

After more than a year of construction and red tape, the latest installment of Obikà, which opened its first mozzarella bar in Rome four years ago, will open on Sept. 22 in the sculpture garden of 590 Madison Avenue, the former I.B.M. building, between 56th and 57th Streets.

Such a single-minded focus on so uncomplicated a cheese seemed like a passing fad when the first Obikà opened. But soon branches arrived in Milan, London, Turin and Parma. And plans are now in motion for locations in Florence, Kuwait City, Athens and Tokyo.

Obikà created its own competition beyond Europe long before its North American debut.

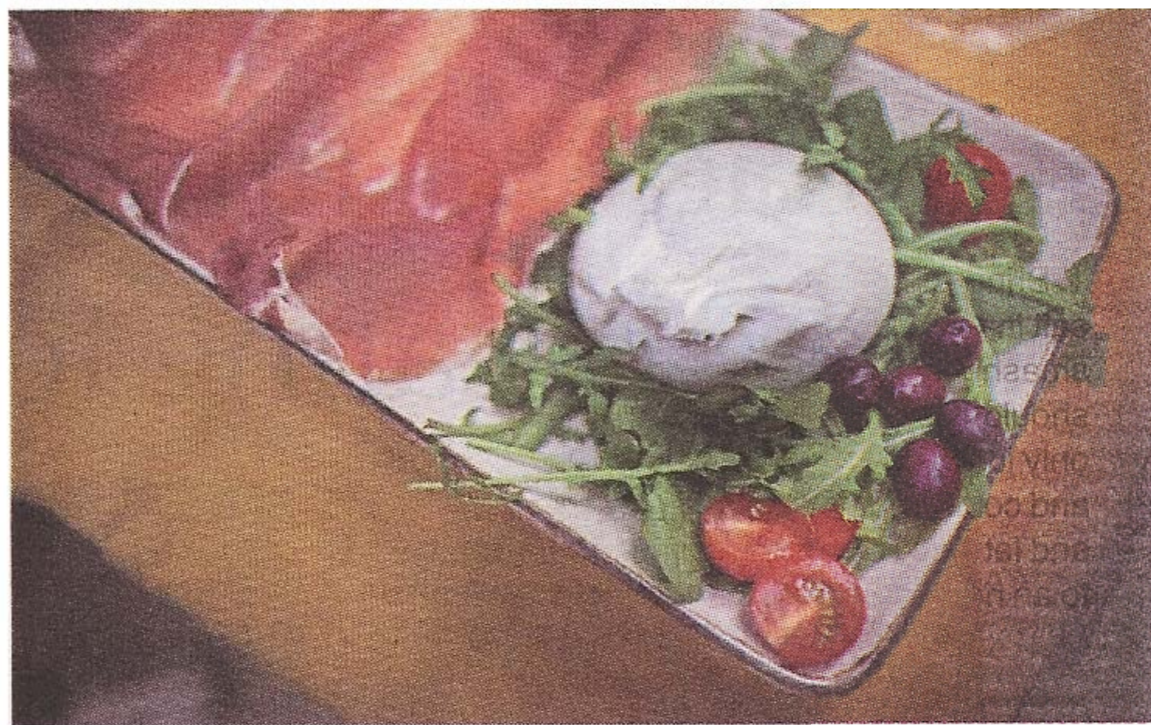
A visit to the one in Rome gave Nancy Silverton the idea for Mozza in Los Angeles. After leaving Campanile and La Brea Bakery, where she made her name as a chef and baker, Ms. Silverton was searching for a new venture.

“I saw Obikà and said, perfect — a mozzarella bar,” Ms. Silverton explained. She first tried the idea out with her friend Suzanne Tracht, the chef and owner of Jar in Los Angeles. At Jar, they created Mozzarella Mondays, a weekly paean to Campania’s top cheese, with pizzas and dishes like burrata with charred marinated escarole, and burricotti with braised artichoke hearts. The restaurant was packed every Monday; the idea was a hit.

A year later, in April 2007, she opened Pizzeria Mozza with Mario Batali and Joseph Bastianich, and three months after that, Osteria Mozza, with a mozzarella bar in the center of the dining room where most of the restaurant’s antipasti are prepared.

Other restaurateurs followed. Last year in Melbourne, Australia, Tony Nicolini opened D.O.C. Pizza & Mozzarella Bar; four months ago, Domenico Cornacchia opened Assaggi Mozzarella Bar in Bethesda, Maryland.

Tony Mantuano, the chef and owner of Spiaggia in Chicago, wants to highlight mozzarella at the Florida wine bar he is plan-



YANA PASKOVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

WHO NEEDS PIZZA? Obikà will be New York’s first mozzarella bar.

ning for South Beach. Mr. Mantuano also caught the mozzarella bug from a visit to Obikà in Rome.

Obikà is the brainchild of Silvio Ursini, a Neapolitan by birth, who dreamed up the idea more than 20 years ago. His inspiration came partly from his local salumeria in Naples, where lines formed for fresh, hand-pinched, creamy mozzarella balls served on plastic plates, and partly from a trip to Japan, where he became enamored of the care and art with which sushi was presented. He imagined a locale that combined the best of both culinary worlds.

By creating a stylish bar where one could swing by for a snack and sips of wine, Mr. Ursini hoped to fill a niche: something between a sandwich stand and a formal restaurant. The minimalism of the counter, the clear containers that hold mozzarella and marinated vegetables instead of raw fish, even the brushstrokes of its logo suggest a Japanese, more than Mediterranean, restaurant. Obikà’s New York kiosk will be a miniature version of its older siblings, designed by the architecture firm Labics of Rome.

Obikà focuses on the most prized mozzarella in Italy, large balls of mozzarella di bufala, made from water buffalo milk. Obikà New York will offer primarily two types of mozzarella di bufala, one a sweet, delicate mozzarella from Paestum in the Campania region of Italy, with a Protected Designation of Origin designation, that will be shipped to New York three times a week,

and a mild, creamy American one from Bufala di Vermont. (Long before the recent mozzarella contamination scare that has plagued farms around Naples, Obikà began testing its mozzarellas monthly for bacteria and toxins.)

The cheese will be served with accompaniments such as Sardinian bottarga, mortadella with pistachios, Tuscan porchetta and fig marmalade. Salads, antipasti, pastas, desserts, coffees and a large selection of Italian wines from small Italian producers will also be available.

But where on their menu is the popular burrata (a ball of mozzarella with a soft center of cream and stracciatelle, or “little rags” of mozzarella left over from the mozzarella-making process); burricotti (ricotta-filled mozzarella); scamorza (smoked mozzarella dipped in wax to lock in the flavor); ovalini (three-and-a-half-ounce balls); and bocconcini (mini mozzarella balls)?

Mr. Ursini said that because of its short shelf life, burrata will only be served occasionally, and scamorza will make an appearance from time to time.

The competition doesn’t seem to worry Mr. Ursini. “I think it’s great,” he said. “It will spread the fame of mozzarella, provided that people are faithful to the product.”

Like panini and gelati, mozzarella may be a craze that lasts. In its new glass home in the center of Midtown Manhattan, Obikà New York has finally figured out the “here it is.” Now it needs to master the “come and get it.”

obikà
MOZZARELLA BAR®