

Fresh From Rome: Belly Up to the Mozzarella Bar

By GABRIEL KAHN

Rome

IN THE KITCHEN at Obikà, a mozzarella bar in the heart of Rome, restaurateur Mattia Pierantoni Cerquozzi is dressing up a hunk of raw *mozzarella di bufala*. Placing the cheese gently on a bed of baby spinach ringed by cherry tomatoes, he gushes about its pedigree. “See that porcelain hue? And the seam here? That’s where it was squeezed off between someone’s thumb and forefinger. That’s how you know it’s real.”

At Obikà, mozzarella is treated with the reverence a sushi chef reserves for yellowfin tuna. “We barely touch it. We don’t even cut it,” says Mr. Pierantoni Cerquozzi. “And we don’t put anything on it, not even salt or olive oil,” for fear of overpowering its subtle, some might say bland, flavor.

Food marketers have given the star treatment to everything from coffee to kiwis—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. But a recent focus on mozzarella is succeeding in pushing the



Big Cheese:
Mozzarella at
Obikà

cheese up the food chain. It’s an unlikely star turn for a food that looks like a large, misshapen hardboiled egg and has a taste so evanescent that it’s best consumed within 48 hours.

In the U.S., a trio of famous chefs—Mario Batali, Joe Bastianich and Nancy Silverton, formerly of Campanile and La Brea Bakery—plan to open their own mozzarella bar in Los Angeles this fall. A few high-end specialty food stores in the States now carry authentic mozzarella di bufala (the real thing is made with milk from buffaloes), shipped by air from Italy, for as much as \$24 a pound. More local artisans are producing their own versions of fresh mozzarella for restaurants and retailers.

But there may be no better place than Obikà to experience the subtleties of mozzarella. It has already expanded to Milan and London, and the owners have plans for New York and even Tokyo. Its flagship in Rome has become a prime meeting point for mozzarella lovers and a training ground for novices.

Waitstaff are carefully instructed on the nuances of the different varieties, and the restaurant takes extra care to make sure its different suppliers stick to the letter of the cheese-making tradition. Food writer Davide Paolini, one of Obikà’s creators, compares mozzarella to “a talented actor who has only found bit parts. I wanted to find a way to create a restaurant in which the mozzarella could play the leading role.”

Mr. Paolini and Obikà’s principal owner, Silvio Ursini, a vice president of the jewelry-and-fashion company Bulgari, settled on a sort of sushi-bar concept. To select the right mix of prosciutto, bresaola and other cured meats to enhance different mozzarellas—each producer boasts its own cheese culture, literally the bacteria that turns the milk into mozzarella—the two men shut themselves in Mr. Ursini’s Tuscan coun-

tryhouse for a three-day tasting session. “It was like a scene from the movie ‘Super Size Me,’” recalls Mr. Paolini.

Obikà’s most popular dish is a platter of three *mozzarelle* from different areas, including one that is smoked on a grill over a hay fire. They should be eaten in the correct order, beginning with the mildest and finishing with the heavier smoked version.

Mr. Pierantoni Cerquozzi says some aficionados prepare their palates by downing a glass of the milky liquid in which the cheese is kept—a practice less-expert diners might find unappetizing, not to mention hygienically dubious. But Mr. Pierantoni Cerquozzi is impressed. “I take my hat off to these people,” he says.

The campaign to create an upscale niche for mozzarella goes back a decade. In 1996, mozzarella di bufala producers clustered mostly in the Campania region around Naples won the right from the European Union to place a seal of authenticity on their product. (A slightly less prestigious version made with cow’s milk is often called *fior di latte*.)

True believers insist that “when you cut mozzarella, it should fold under the knife,” says Vincenzo Oliviero, the head of the producers’ consortium in Campania. “White liquid should ooze forth and should give off an odor of fermenting milk that makes your nose itch. The taste should leave a residue of hazelnut, chocolate, an almost earthy taste as it goes down your throat.”

Most importantly, connoisseurs say, it should be eaten at room temperature within 48 hours after it’s made. “Logistics is our handicap,” concedes Mr. Oliviero. One producer, Torre di Lupara, has developed a way to freeze mozzarella with a liter of the milky water in which it’s stored; it’s defrosted over eight hours—but since it’s frozen, it can’t carry the official seal.

Where to Shop

Here are five good sources for imported or locally made mozzarella.

■ CHICAGO

Conte Di Savoia 312-666-3471

Fresh mozzarella made on-site on weekends (\$5.69 a pound).

■ LOS ANGELES

Cheesestore of Silver Lake 323-644-7511

Domestic cow’s-milk mozzarella (\$4 for eight ounces); mozzarella di bufala flown in from Italy (\$11 to \$12 for eight ounces).

■ NEW YORK

DiPalo’s 212-226-1033

Certified mozzarella di bufala (\$6.99 for nine ounces), plus homemade *fior di latte* (\$5.75 a pound). The highest-rated cheese and dairy vendor in the Zagat Survey’s 2007 New York City Marketplace guide.

■ SAN FRANCISCO AREA

The Pasta Shop, Oakland, Calif.

510-547-4005

Mozzarella di bufala from Italy (\$4.99 for five ounces) and a domestic water-buffalo version from California producer Bupalus Bupalis (\$7.99 for 10 ounces).

■ WASHINGTON AREA

Marcella’s Pizzeria, Chevy Chase, Md.

301-951-1818

Mozzarella made daily (\$6.95 a pound).

Sources: Zagat Survey and Wall Street Journal research