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THE STORY ON LOCAL FOOD

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pull your own mozzarella
better than ten mothers
the king of bees



Hand-Pulled at Home

BY ANNMARIE MACKINNON • PHOTOS BY KEVIN CLARK



Make Your Own Mozzarella

It has recently come to my attention that Vancouver's East Side is completely devoid of water buffalo. For most people, an urban neighbourhood lacking a sufficient number of ruminants would likely go unnoticed. It might even be welcomed. That is, until they get it into their heads that the one thing standing between them and the freshest *insalata caprese* (sliced garden-warm tomatoes and pungent hand-torn basil anointed with olive oil and a silky balsamic vinegar) is a ball of homemade *mozzarella di bufala*. Precisely the predicament in which I found myself.

The creamy texture and slightly sweet flavour of a ball of fresh buffalo mozzarella is the catalyst for the culinary alchemy that turns a simple combination of fruit and herbs into your personal passport to the Isle of Capri, from which the salad originates. But after what turned out to be some very awkward conversations with local grocers concerning their knowledge of nearby buffalo populations, it became apparent to me that I'd have to seek alternatives for my cheese-making purposes.

Mozzarella is generally made with cow's milk in North America. With a few notable exceptions, such as **Fairburn Farms** in Vancouver Island's Cowichan Valley (which incidentally also lays claim to its own herd of water buffalo), the hand-pulled tradition has been replaced by machines. Getting a ball of hand-pulled mozzarella is a real treat, but it can be as close as your own kitchen.

It's actually surprisingly simple to make mozzarella at home, and requires a minimum of equipment. You'll need a large pot, a big bowl, a colander, a slotted spoon and a thermometer. I found that a pair of heavy rubber gloves were also handy for when you're ready to work the curds into cheese.

I sampled a few recipes, some found online, and the one included with my package of rennet tablets. None of the recipes I tried stood alone. On several occasions I found myself—sacrilege—cursing the curd. Many recipes led me to believe that the curd would be fairly firm, but no matter what I tried, it seemed to retain a certain fragility, making gentleness key when moving the curd from the warming pot to the bowl of hot water. I also found the use of cheesecloth essential, otherwise much of the smaller curd gets lost to the whey, and the yield of actual cheese becomes very small. (The whey can later be made into the softest ricotta you've ever tasted.) In the end, I relied on my own senses and my perhaps too-extensive experience with pizza to make a cheese closely resembling that made by the pros. *continued...*



CAPRESE SALAD

This is stunningly gorgeous and easy to make. The quality of the finished dish is entirely dependent on the strength of each ingredient: deep, flavourful tomatoes in their prime; soft, creamy mozzarella made fresh from the milk of cows or water buffalo; and just-picked basil leaves.

- 3 or 4 beautifully ripe tomatoes
- 1 ball (1 lb or 450g) fresh mozzarella, packed in water
- a generous handful of fresh basil
- about 4 Tbsp (60mL) extra virgin olive oil
- about 2 Tbsp (30mL) balsamic vinegar (optional*)
- sea salt
- freshly ground pepper (optional)

Drain mozzarella carefully. Slice the tomatoes and mozzarella, not too thin. On a platter, gently arrange layers of tomatoes, mozzarella, and basil leaves. Drizzle with a little olive oil and balsamic (if desired), and sprinkle with salt and pepper (if you like). Serve at room temperature.

*The traditional Caprese is often made without vinegar, but lots of salad lovers have found that a little balsamic gives it extra pzazz. If the purist in you shudders at the idea, just leave it out. Same goes for pepper. We think that cooking is a creative process, so experiment. Try different varieties of tomato and different types of basil (but we're going to be sticklers and insist that the basil is always fresh; if not, you really can't call it a Caprese). —*editor*

After much trial and error, what I came up with was an easy recipe for a mozzarella that came together in a way that was beautifully stretchy, with a mild, but delicious, creamy sweetness—the perfect foil for the acidity of tomatoes in a salad. Or for an appearance, golden and bubbly, on a pizza Margherita.

For my effort, not only was I rewarded by an impressive ball of homemade cheese, I also discovered that despite the woeful lack of water buffalo in East Van, a passport to Italy is perfectly within grasp.

To Make Your Own Mozzarella Cheese You Need:

- 3 litres whole milk (cow or goat)
- 1 rennet tablet*
- 2 tsp (10mL) citric acid*
- About 1 Tbsp (15mL) salt (sounds like a lot, but much will be lost in the pulling process)

To avoid imparting an “off” flavour to your cheese, sterilize all the utensils you plan to use before beginning.

*Rennet is available at specialty food stores like **Famous Foods**, and **Galloway’s** has citric acid.

Add rennet to ½ cup (125mL) of cool water and set aside. In a separate cup, dissolve citric acid in ¼ cup (60mL) of cool water. In a large stainless steel pot, bring the milk to 90°F. Add the citric acid and stir thoroughly. You’ll notice some curdling. Add the dissolved

rennet and stir for 30 seconds, then let the milk rest while a firm curd sets, about an hour. During this time, keep the milk warm by putting the pot in a hot water bath, or in the oven on the warm setting. Slice the curd into small squares with a long knife and rest for a few minutes. During this rest, fill the sink with hot water at a temperature around 120°F. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the curd to a colander lined with cheesecloth and allow the whey to drain into a bowl. Add the whey back to the milk pot and sit the pot in the hot water bath. Sit the colander in the whey so the curds are submerged and kept warm. Add salt.

Fill a clean bowl with water heated to 175°F, and place the pieces of curd into the water to heat them. Once all the curd has been added, begin to work it with your slotted spoon, or with your hands while wearing rubber gloves. Work the pieces of curd together and then begin stretching. If you have trouble stretching the curd, add hot water to the bowl to bring the temperature back up. When the curds are in a single mass and can be easily stretched, you’re ready to form the cheese into a ball. The more you work the cheese, the dryer the finished product will be. To store the cheese, place it in an airtight container filled with cool water, salt, and a few tablespoons of whey.

Originally from rural Cape Breton, AnnMarie MacKinnon is a Vancouver-based freelance writer who has more experience with ruminants than she cares to share. This may explain her intolerance for lactose intolerance.

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