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Mozzarella magic

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco, For The Star-Ledger

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MITSU YASUKAWA/THE STAR-LEDGER

Giuseppe Cuomo stretches the melted curd at Jerry's Gourmet and More in Englewood.

Steam rises as Giuseppe Cuomo takes a wooden paddle to the shapeless mass moistened with scalding water. He immerses his bare hands into the milky hot liquid, pulling and stretching.

With the help of an assistant, he continues to tug at the ghostly form until it can be draped over his arm like a length of fine cloth. The transformation completed, he tears off a glob of the lustrous paste and rolls it into a smooth porcelain-colored ball.

With fingers as sturdy as a sculptor's, Cuomo deftly twists handfuls of his pliable medium into a fat braid, a piglet, a dove and sets them in cool water to

set their shape.

"E la magia di Peppino" -- It's Joe's magic -- said Costantino Cammarano, the executive chef at Jerry's Gourmet and More in Englewood as he stepped away from his stove just long enough to admire Cuomo's wizardry. It's the magic of mozzarella.

"For a lot of people, mozzarella is the goopy cheese on the pizza," said Cuomo, 59, a fourth-generation cheese maker from Vico Equense, Italy. In his native region of Campania, the people are as passionate about their mozzarella as the Tuscans are about their wine. His freshly made product bears little resemblance to the vacuum-packed bricks of rubbery cheese that go by the same name in most supermarkets. Intended to be eaten at room temperature, ideally within 24 hours, "it must be fresh and juicy," he said. "The ones in the supermarket are done by machine. This is made by hand. The finished product has to be soft, juicy, and creamy. It's an artisanal process, fresh daily, with respect to tradition."

Working 10 hours a day, usually on-site, for about 20 clients that include several Manhattan restaurants, such as Tribeca Grill, Bice and Naples 45, and Panevino Ristorante in Livingston, as well as Jerry's, Cuomo turns out about 2,000 pounds of mozzarella a week. "Mozzarella is in my blood," he said.

Cuomo began learning how to make mozzarella at age 10, and his two brothers still operate the family's cheese making company, La Sorrentina, in Italy. Cuomo transplanted his skills to the United States, where he eventually was hired by the Italian filmmaker, Dino De Laurentiis, to work at DDL Foodshow in Manhattan in the 1980s.

Over the years, his mozzarella has crossed the lips of notables ranging from Sophia Loren to Geraldine Ferraro, from Robert Klein to Robert DeNiro, "da papi a presidenti" -- from popes to presidents -- he said. Notwithstanding his many encounters with celebrity, he said, "Cheese is my life."

On his right hand -- "cooked," like his left, from decades of cheese making, he said -- he wears a gold ring, engraved with the letters GC, that was passed on to him from his grandfather, whose name and trade he carries on.

Cuomo begins the process by setting cow's milk curd out at room temperature. He slices off a large chunk with a knife and then cuts it into uniform pieces by pushing it through a stainless steel-stringed cutter called a chitarra -- "guitar" -- set over a bowl. He sprinkles the curd with kosher salt and begins stirring as water heated to about 160 degrees is carefully poured along the sides of the bowl. There are no measuring cups or thermometers in sight. Everything is done by eye and by feel.

Immediately, the liquid assumes a yellowish cast as the curd releases butterfat and other solids. "When you shock the curd with that hot water, the fat wants to expel," explained Frank Angeloni, a consultant with Providence Specialty Products of Providence, RI, which manufactures the Benevento brand of curd that Cuomo favors. "If you dump the water on top, you'll lose too much fat and the yield will go down. It will become hard and dry. The goal is to make the most mozzarella, and the most tender mozzarella."

Stirring with an oak paddle purchased in lower Manhattan -- "Now you find more Italian things here than in Italy," said Cuomo -- Cuomo works quickly to obtain a pleasing texture. "The touch of your hands tells you when it's

water with cool water to break the cooking process. Stretching and squeezing, Cuomo tears off globes of cheese by hand. This motion -- mozzare in Italian (to lop off) -- gives mozzarella its name. The result of Cuomo's labor is so luscious that the Italians call it fior di latte, flower of milk.

Many Italian specialty stores offer homemade mozzarella, but artisans like Cuomo are becoming increasingly rare. "He's a specialist, and he's a good teacher, too. But do you think there's going to be another generation?" said Jerry Turci, who heads Jerry's Gourmet.

At Tuscany Italian Specialties in Manalapan, two of the store's partners, Sal Faenza and Vincent La Franca, share the mozzarella-making chores. "We're like the last generation," said Faenza, who's 41. "No one wants to learn to do it. The water is hot; it's a lot of work. They don't have the passion." Large commercial manufacturers, he added, "make pretty good machine-made mozzarella, but it's not the same. The curd is different every time, so you have to know how to work it."

Faenza learned to make mozzarella from old-world cheese makers in his native Brooklyn, where most Italian food stores sold their own fior di latte. "Now it's hard to find it the way we make it. That's why we sell a lot of it," said Faenza, who makes 80 to 100 pounds a day and about twice as much on the weekend for sale at his shop and at Sickles Market in Little Silver.

"Mozzarella has always been one of the most popular of the non-American (cheese) varieties," said Don Blayney, an agricultural economist with the Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC. According to ERS estimates, in 2006 mozzarella was the most popularly consumed cheese in the nation -- 10.5 pounds per capita -- edging out Cheddar, at 10.44 pounds. The widespread appeal of pizza is one of the factors feeding the demand for mozzarella, "but some of it is also that people have become more connoisseurs of all kinds of cheese," said Blayney.

"Now there is more education about mozzarella," said Cuomo. "It has become very trendy." ObikÃ , an Italian chain of mozzarella bars (the name means "look here" in Neapolitan dialect) featuring buffalo mozzarella from the Campania region, is expected to open a New York location.

Made from the milk of water buffalo, not bison, buffalo mozzarella imported from the Campania region is a protected denomination of origin (DOP) product and a favorite of gourmets. But it is much more expensive than fior di latte, which typically costs about \$8 a pound. "A lot of people don't understand the product," said Faenza.

Though Cuomo acknowledges the fine quality of mozzarella made from buffalo milk, which is richer in protein, fat and calcium than cow's milk, he still favors freshly made fior di latte over imported mozzarella di bufala because, even when shipped as quickly as possible, "it loses something," he said.

In August, the Woodstock Water Buffalo Company of Woodstock, VT, one of only two water buffalo dairies in the United States, took first place in the fresh mozzarella category of the American Cheese Society's 2007 Cheese Competition with its fresh buffalo mozzarella, which is stretched by machine. A six-ounce ball retails for \$6 to \$7. "It's very expensive for us to have the herd here," said Carey Clifford, the company's director of marketing. "They

produces 60 to 80 pounds of milk a day."

Curd obtained from water buffalos in the United States is not the same as that from water buffalos in Italy, said Cuomo. And even the mozzarella he makes by hand is not exactly like the handmade mozzarella from his hometown. He has high praise for American milk, particularly from Vermont and Wisconsin; however, "Milk is like wine. Where it comes from makes a difference," he said.

And so does passion for a time-honored craft, he insisted. "I love what I do."

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