

The white buffalo

Australian mozzarella is on the rise with a Queensland producer striving to emulate the Italian model.

In Italy, true mozzarella means just one thing: soft, springy, sweet, dense buffalo milk curd inside a tissue paper-thin skin. Buffalo came to Italy from India in the 16th century, and a specialised industry grew up around Naples producing a cheese, *mozzarella di bufala*, which today has regional accreditation under EU law. For many years, mozzarella in Australia referred to industrially-produced pizza cheese made from offcuts from other cheesemaking that bore as much resemblance to real mozzarella as the powdered ‘parmesan’ sold in shakers bears to true Parmigiano Reggiano. Thankfully, that’s starting to change. Limited quantities of *mozzarella di bufala* are air-freighted into the country weekly, and two buffalo dairies have been established: one at Shaw River in Victoria and another at the small township of Millaa Millaa in Far North Queensland, the output of which, say some chefs, is getting close to the real thing.

Mitch Humphries, cheesemaker for Ambrose, calls himself “a dairy cocky, not a cheese boffin”. In fact, he’s never tasted authentic mozzarella in Italy. So how did he end up making buffalo milk mozzarella in Far North Queensland? “It started when I was learning to make cheese from our 200-cow dairy farm. I was intrigued by the variety of animals from which cheese could be made, especially water buffaloes, and wondered why more people weren’t doing it here. But the cementing factor was when I actually came in contact with these fascinating creatures on a farm in NSW. From then on I knew I really wanted to work with these big mutts.”

It’s been a steep learning curve for Humphries. “My cheesemaking training taught me the two essentials: only use the best milk and the little things count, and the help I’ve received from Richard Thomas [one of the pioneers of farmhouse cheesemaking in Australia and



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producer of award-winning Gippsland Blue] has been invaluable.” Thomas has worked in buffalo mozzarella factories in Italy and he and Humphries have worked hard to adapt the regional characteristics of Humphries’ milk to the traditional art of mozzarella-making. “Our buffaloes have a diet of lush tropical pastures, which produces milk that’s slightly different to that of Italian buffaloes,” says Humphries. “While our cheese is close to the Italian model, it has its own unique signature, which we think is an asset as it makes it regionally specific.”

Asked about his favourite part of the cheesemaking process, he’s quick to point out that it’s not the stretching: “dipping your hands into 90C water is not pleasant – it’s bordering on insanity! But after many months chasing the slippery, hot curd around in the bottom of the tub, I am proud to have mastered the right hold and to be able to form the snow-white glistening spheres of cheese.”

Ambrose mozzarella is also biodynamic and Humphries says how you run your farm is important. “The theories of biodynamics can sound a bit

over-the-top, but I think if it works, just do it. The other aspect is how you treat your animals – my wife often shakes her head when she hears me speaking more fondly to the buffs than I do to her.”

Buffalo mozzarella has a very short shelf life; ideally, it should be eaten within a couple of days of production, making a good local product preferable to that air-freighted from Italy. Humphries makes mozzarella twice a week from milk that is no more than 24 hours old and, as production increases, it will be made from same-day milk and air-freighted to major cities for use in the best *insalata caprese* or melted on the finest pizza Margherita. It’s currently available at Pompei’s in Bondi, Fenix in Melbourne and Isis Brasserie in Brisbane, and is worth seeking out for its pearl-white colour, slightly salty tang, creamy mouth-feel and lactic aroma. *

Pompei Gelateria & Pizzeria, 126 Roscoe St, Bondi Beach, NSW, (02) 9365 1233. Fenix, 680 Victoria St, Richmond, Vic, (03) 9427 8500. Isis Brasserie, 446 Brunswick St, Fortitude Valley, Qld, (07) 3852 1155.