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Paula Lambert Stellar Cheesemaker And Iconic Entrepreneur

Meet Mozzarella Company's founder — a Texas treasure



Paula Lambert is mesmerizing shoppers at the northernmost frontier of exurban Dallas. Standing near Murray's kiosk at the grand opening of Kroger Marketplace in Prosper, TX, she is handing out tastes of Mozzarella Company cheeses. Her friendly, infectious smile; luminous white hair; signature red glasses; and warm, slow voice are a magnet: Kids flirt with her; adults chat her up.

Until Lambert founded her own tiny factory in 1982, the concept of a local creamery making small batch, fresh cheese daily by hand did not exist in the region. She made her own path, selling her wares locally and nationally, and wholesale and retail, before “handcrafted” and “artisanal” were trends. Decades ago she embraced local, using ingredients indigenous to Texas — herbs, such as *hoja santa* and *epazote*; pecans and various chiles. First she made a single cheese, Fresh Mozzarella; then grew production to more than 30 specialty cheeses, each made by hand from fresh milk and perfectly turned out in the same factory today.

She is thankful for every honor from her earliest cheese awards in 1985 to the newest in 2015, and the especially meaningful 2012 Good Food Award. Being inducted into the James Beard Foundation Who's Who of Food and Beverage in America — one of the highest accolades in the food world — in 1998, is humbling and exciting, says Lambert, because “it’s being chosen by your peers.” Tireless, optimistic and profoundly loyal, she’s logged more than 20 terms on the boards of community and professional organizations. She currently serves on the Specialty Food Association board of directors.

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Writing *The Cheese Lover’s Cookbook and Guide* in 2000 led to teaching, marketing and writing a second cookbook, *Cheese Glorious Cheese*. She taught 25 week-long cooking classes in France at La Combe en Périgord. When La Combe closed, Lambert founded Viaggi Deliziosi and created her idyllic culinary travel and cooking classes in Italy and Ireland.

At 73, the charismatic chief executive, a widow, exudes energy and elegance. Running her companies, writing a column for the Prime Women website, teaching, and meeting the public at events, or selling cheese at a local farmers market with her genteel standard poodle Teddy at her side — Paula Lambert is a legend in her own lifetime, pouring her genuine love of entertaining and her graciousness into everything she does.

Cheese Connoisseur: First things first — what’s your favorite cheese?

Paula Lambert: Fresh Mozzarella has always been my favorite. I absolutely love it and never get tired of it. I also like many different cheeses — Parmigiano-Reggiano, all those great cheeses of France, and aged Gouda from Holland.

CC: What philosophy guides you?

PL: You have to follow your heart. Do the things that you like. If you’re happy and doing the things you love, things go much better. And be open to letting things happen. It sounds frivolous but it really is true.

CC: How did you get hooked on Italy?

PL: The pivotal thing in my life was going to Perugia. I loved it so much I didn't want to come home. I just figured out a way I could stay there. I lived in Italy for five years. I studied art history — mostly Renaissance, Medieval and Baroque.

CC: Do you speak Italian?

PL: I have the equivalent of a Master's degree from L'Università per Stranieri di Perugia in Italian. My Italian is perfect — except for my Texas accent.

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CC: Did you imagine running your business in the same building for 34 years?

PL: I am a very loyal and steadfast person. I am loyal to friends and suppliers and many things. I could never have my company in a retail or residential area. The zoning had to be "Industrial 3" — like a lead smelter. So I found Deep Ellum. It was just a boarded-up part of town, so depressed they didn't even have For Lease signs. But there were sidewalks. I rented the corner space and I planted the tree. On my street there were a few businesses and a meat market that opened in 1895 and is still there. Fortunately, because of the way we operate, we've been able to stay in that spot and make more and more cheeses. We make all our cheeses in small vats that are on wheels so we can be very agile. It's just part of me to do many different things simultaneously. We're making all these cheeses at one time.

CC: Deep Ellum has changed...

PL: Today, Deep Ellum is the bohemian part of Dallas that has lots of clubs, restaurants and shops. The restaurants are more chic. We have a stop on the DART two blocks away. It's a very viable part of town. We had renovations converting our street from a four-lane expressway feel to a streetscape with perennial flower plantings.

CC: How did you have the courage to start your own business?

PL: I had the support of my friends and my parents. My husband Jim was also very supportive and gave me lots of good advice. If you're married, you can't go off and do something like this and not have the support of your spouse.

CC: And you weren't initially driven by cheese?

PL: It was pure luck — just luck — that it was cheese. I was thinking about making a food product that I liked — one that was Italian — because I wanted to be able to go to Italy on business trips. I don't know if I would have been so successful with another product. I didn't know what I was doing. If I did, why would I choose a product that was so perishable and has a shelf life of only 10 days?

CC: How did you know what equipment to get?

PL: Rodney, a dairy equipment salesman for a company in Fort Worth, helped me find equipment. He used to volunteer one day every week fixing the old, broken equipment that I bought. He introduced me to everyone I would buy equipment from or buy milk from. He would come to all the events. He and his wife were really sweet, and he was a big part of the Mozzarella Company.

CC: Texas claims you as an ambassador — and you're named in the Dallas 500, the most influential leaders in North Texas. Tell us about your roots...

PL: I'm very lucky. I live in Dallas and grew up in Fort Worth. I had a wonderful childhood. Fort Worth was a part of the South when I was growing up. There's that graciousness about it. It was not considered a part of the Southwest then. Both my parents were born in Fort Worth. My father was an attorney. My mother was a housewife and a volunteer. I was born in California during the war — they were just there at that particular time — and they went back to Fort Worth, so really I'm from Fort Worth. When I was honored by the Dallas Historic Society with the Creative Arts Award the first thing I said was, "I'm from Fort Worth — and this means so much to me." The audience loved that.

CC: Why do you contribute to so many community events?

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PL: Underneath it all I've always been a volunteer. It goes back to the volunteerism that comes from my mother, who was a wonderful volunteer. It's a way for a

little company that doesn't advertise to get itself recognized. I always loved to help. All the things I do are tied together with food and culture. I think the more you put into something the more you'll get out of it because you learn by doing things. So I've volunteered to work in many organizations.

CC: How do you involve yourself in the community?

PL: Right now I'm trying to help the North Texas Food Bank raise money for its capital campaign, and I participate in many organizations and groups. For many years, I've been involved with the Uptown Dallas Public Improvement District, a community organization for my neighborhood, and the Dallas chapter of the International Women's Forum, a local group of top businesswomen shaping the community agenda. I participate by being a patron of the arts in the community — cultural activities, the symphony, opera and art museum.

CC: You've been a member of Les Dames d'Escoffier since 1985 — a very prestigious group.

PL: It's quite an honor to be a member. It's a wonderful group of women in the food, wine and hospitality business. I've been treasurer and on the board and chaired PR for both the Dallas chapter and International — and served on all sorts of committees. I was vice president of International. Our purpose is raising money for scholarships for women who are in the culinary, wine and hospitality fields. The chapters each have their own programs and events. They come together once a year at an international meeting.

CC: Were there barriers for a woman-owned enterprise?

PL: No. Most of the chefs were men, and most of the cheesemakers — especially goat cheesemakers in this country — were women. I was selling to chefs. We made cheese in the factory in the morning. In the afternoon, I'd be the person driving the truck to deliver the cheese. I met all the chefs. I would see what they were doing with chiles and herbs and I'd go back and put them in my cheese. That's how I started flavoring my Caciotta with Mexican marigold mint and ancho chili and cilantro. The challenge was it took so long — the cheese had to age before I could take my new cheeses back to show the chefs. I'm a member of groups related to business and I'm certified as a minority business owner. I'm a member of WCR [Women Chefs and Restaurateurs] and Les Dames and IWF but not just because they are women. For me, the organizations have been a wonderful

way to meet people. The members have been supportive of each other as friends.

I've been able to find people who are so devoted and so good at what they do.

I couldn't have the business I have without them

CC: How did you team up with other producers?

PL: I met Susan Auler (winemaker, Fall Creek Vineyard in Tow, TX) at the very beginning. We've been doing things together forever because our wine and cheese go together — for 32 or 33 years. I think the joint marketing is a very positive thing. The same with Empire Baking. I stopped by on the day it opened in 1992 to get some bread for an event. I tasted their pecan raisin bread, and loved it. I immediately went back to Mozzarella Company to get the Pecan Praline Torta. It's been one of our most popular pairings for 25 years now.

CC: People might be surprised to know...

PL: I was the first person to make fresh Mozzarella from water buffalo milk in the United States. People were getting to know Buffalo Mozzarella, so I was looking for the milk. In the 1990s, I found out about a man raising water buffalo in Texarkana, so I contacted him, and made fresh Mozzarella. But the milk cost a lot more than cow's milk. Nobody wanted the Buffalo Mozzarella so we had to have a "fire sale" each week. Eventually he decided to sell the animals and they were no longer in Texarkana. I also made sheep milk cheese early on. I knew of a girl making sheep's milk cheese in the Hudson River Valley in New York, and a man in Minnesota who was milking sheep. So, for a couple of summers, I got his milk and made Pecorino with black peppercorns in it. I tried mixing it with cow's milk, too.

CC: ...and your raw milk cheese?

PL: I created the Blanca Bianca because there was interest in raw milk cheese, and washed cheeses were catching on. It's more for a cheeseboard than for cooking — and has become popular.

CC: Why did you go to where the cheese originated to learn to make it?

PL: There was no other place to go to learn to make cheese like they have in Europe, and that was what I wanted to do. How are you going to make cheese like they do unless you go there? I went to factories that made the cheese by hand and I learned from them. In France, I got the palate of their cheese. In Oaxaca, with Patricia Quintana, who wrote seminal cookbooks and researched the regional Mexican food that was dying out, we would talk to the women selling cheese at the markets and then visit their houses and learn from them. I went to Greece with the American Cheese Society and American Institute of Wine & Food. We watched them making cheese there. After that, I met some Greek professors and started making Feta. Now, there are cheese institutes and cheese courses in many states. When I started, there was no one to ask anything. There was only Ricki Carroll's book, Cheesemaking Made Easy. And we all used it.

CC: When did you win your first award?

PL: It was 1985. One of my customers said, "There's an organization called the American Cheese Society holding a judging and you ought to enter." I sent off my cheeses, and a brown envelope arrived at the factory with all these ribbons. I decided the next year I was going to go. From then on I would go to the ACS conference and I would volunteer. I was the treasurer for many years.

CC: Do you have any idea how many awards you've won?

PL: No, I haven't counted recently.

CC: How did you help in the ACS judging room?

PL: Daphne (Zepos) was the head of the judging at one point. I observed in the judging room just to make sure things were fair for the cheesemakers, and wrote a report. I did not enter cheeses those years. One of the things I noticed was the entries were judged with their retail labels. I didn't think that was fair, and objected. After that, retail labels were no longer allowed on the entries. Now, all these years later, the Specialty Food Association is redoing their award system — they're going to take off the labels for the judging. That's an example of how the industry has changed.

CC: What challenges did you have to overcome?

PL: In the early days, so many you can't believe. Where to get the milk? I had all this old second

hand equipment. It was a disaster a minute. I should have written it down. My biggest challenge was making my business profitable. It's all a matter of economics.

CC: How has technology affected you?

PL: We have always embraced technology but I remember when we didn't even have a fax machine. We were on the Internet so early, the search word on AOL for cheese went directly to our website. That didn't last forever. Our focus this year is to improve the website for e-commerce.

CC: You've been featured on TV and radio...

PL: I'm a frequent guest on all sorts of programs. I've done cooking classes and tours of the Mozzarella Company on TV and video. We've done many TV programs here for Food Network and PBS — from Nathalie Dupree in the '80s, to Mario Batali, Stephan Pyles, Ming Tsai, Curtis Stone, and Aaron Sanchez. I've been on local TV stations all over the country. When I was on Sara Moulton's show, the nicest thing happened on her call-in segment. Somebody called in from Dallas — I didn't even know who it was — and just wanted to thank me for doing so many things for Dallas. I've been on BBC radio, PBS, and CBS (KRLD) — the restaurant show.

CC: How are you able to juggle running the factory with travel and teaching?

PL: It's because fantastic people work for me. A long time ago in the life of my company, I decided that I couldn't have a job that depended on me being in the factory every single day. I had to find people who could do those jobs. I can do every job in the factory from making cheese to accounting, to packaging, to delivery — but somebody has that as a real job so I can do other things. I've been able to find people who are so devoted and so good at what they do. I couldn't have the business I have without them.

CC: Tell us about Teddy, your standard poodle — he's so dignified when you're selling cheese at the outdoor market.

PL: Teddy likes people. He likes to go for walks, and go in the car with me — sometimes on errands, and to eat on the terrace of dog-friendly restaurants. Both Jim and I always had dogs. My dogs lived in the house. Jim's hunting dogs lived outside in kennels. We bought Teddy from a show-dog

breeder who hadn't sold him because Teddy had a little back foot that turned inward. He's just crazy about chasing cats and also interested in possums. He can sit at our front door forever to look out for them. He knows how to pounce on the door and make it open. At the end of a dinner party when people hug me to say goodnight he gets excited because he knows he's going to go out. He leaps over all the steps coming up to the door to look for the cats.

CC: How do you measure success?

PL: When the cheese is good. When it is consistent. And when it sells. When you're recognized by your peers for accomplishment. When people go on my trips and have so much fun and it exceeds their expectations. When people visit our cheese factory from all over the world, and when a European likes my cheese, that's a great compliment.

CC: Why does cheese matter?

PL: First of all, it's a natural food product and it's existed from ancient times. When you think about cheese, beer, wine and bread, they're all fermented foods. Cheese is pure, it's nutritious and it's delicious.

CC: Was there a point when you realized you have created something very special?

PL: No, I've never felt that way. Every day we have to make good cheese. There's always the challenge of making the cheese. We have to sell the cheese. We have to fulfill the orders. We're trying to keep the customers we have and find new customers every day. We're not resting on our laurels. **CC**

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