



CHEESE



How an American entrepreneur with a passion for fresh mozzarella brought home a slice of Italian culture and now serves up millions in the cheese business.

Paula Lambert fell in love while she was on an extended visit to Perugia, Italy. She vowed to bring her new love — creamy, smooth, egg-shaped balls of fresh mozzarella cheese — with her when she returned home to Dallas. “The fresh mozzarella I loved and ate every day while I lived in Italy simply wasn’t available at home,” Lambert says. “I founded The Mozzarella Company with one clear goal — to make the same fresh mozzarella I had enjoyed in Italy. I realized that in order to have this wonderful cheese in Texas I was going to have to make it myself.”

So first she learned to make mozzarella by hand from Mauro Brufani, who owned a cheese factory near Perugia, because “For me to even attempt to bring this special-yet-simple food to the U.S., I knew it would have to be as close to the real thing as possible,” she says. Under Brufani’s tutelage, Lambert became as enamored of the process as the product. Starting with fresh milk each morning, the mozzarella was ready to sell in the afternoon. Lambert felt this idea would catch on in her native Dallas, especially if she could capture and communicate the charm of Italian life and link it with the cheese’s unique, farm-fresh taste.

Photos provided by Paula Lambert.

But when she opened her cheese factory in Dallas some 24 years ago, Paula Lambert was the only one eating The Mozzarella Company's fresh mozzarella every day. That is, until the American cuisine scene began to embrace gourmet cooking, organic and exotic ingredients, artisan-crafted products and food TV. Then, she was poised and ready for success.

Just as the late Julia Child — America's beloved culinary luminary — worked to introduce French cooking to American housewives via public television in the 1960s, Paula Lambert transformed her dreams and determination to lucrative reality. The Mozzarella Company now makes 250,000 pounds of cheese every year. Some is sold out of the front door of her small retail space in a converted 1920s brick building near downtown Dallas, but the majority moves out the back door that opens onto the factory space. Lambert now ships her cheese to wholesale buyers, including specialty grocers and gourmet restaurants across the nation.

Each pound sells for \$7.50 wholesale or \$13 retail. "I've met a lot of people who've become friends and customers since 1982 when we opened," Lambert says. "Many are well-known chefs who, like me, were almost accidentally a part of this great movement in the 1980s to enhance American cuisine with European and Asian classics and to move away from processed convenience foods to homemade dishes with fresh ingredients." She says her multi-million-dollar business started the way many businesses do — with a dream. And she shares her story of making that dream come true with \$1,000,000aire Blueprints readers.

Take us back to the very beginning and explain what took you to Italy in the first place.

I grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, with the privileges that came from being the only child of a successful attorney and his energetic, community-minded wife. I attended Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, and graduated from the University of Texas with degrees in elementary education and history. After college, I just wasn't ready to settle down, so I convinced my parents to let me learn to speak Italian in Italy. After some research at the college library, I applied and was accepted at a fabulous language university in Perugia. Luckily, my parents felt as I did, that immersion in another country's culture was a sort of "baptism by fire," as far as learning a foreign language goes. That idea, plus the reputation of Perugia's Università per Stranieri, was enough for a sound decision.

Once there, how did you go about learning to speak Italian?

I found the school lived up to its renown. The theory was to teach conversational Italian as well as drilling us on grammar and vocabulary. We learned how people really spoke, and, of course, we had ample opportunity to listen and practice in the small, friendly town.

You said your first idea for a business was vaguely "something to do with Italy and food." How did that concept become The Mozzarella Company?

That started with a Christmas visit to see our Italian friends, Suzanne and Enrico Bartolucci, in 1981 — a

good eight years after I'd come home from Italy. The Bartoluccis served a salad of fresh mozzarella, tomato and basil for lunch, and that was my light bulb moment. We could get good Italian wines back home, imported dried pastas, and we could grow our own Italian herbs on the windowsill. But we couldn't buy fresh mozzarella in Dallas. I told Suzanne about my idea, and she became one of my two silent partners on the spot. The other is my friend Carole Jordan. The three of us invested a total of \$50,000, ultimately, for the start-up of The Mozzarella Company.

So what did you do first?

That same afternoon, our friends took us down to the local cheese factory, and I asked the owner, Mauro Brufani, if I could watch them make



ITALY

Left: It was during her attendance at language college in Perugia that Lambert's love of Italian cheese was born.

Right: Giovanni Marchesi — a professor that teaches cheese-making at a university in North Italy — traveled to Dallas to help Lambert get The Mozzarella Company up and running. These photos were taken the first day Marchesi and Lambert made cheese at her fledgling company.

mozzarella. He said yes. I decided to extend my trip. After a few days of watching, I asked Mauro if he would teach me to make mozzarella. Fortunately, he said yes again. I bought a pair of rubber boots and a little white cotton cheese-maker's hat, and I went to the Caseificio Brufani (Brufani Cheese Factory) at 6:00 a.m. sharp each morning for three weeks.

Did you tell Brufani what you were up to?

Yes, and when I told him of my plans, he called a young Italian professor he knew who taught the science and technique of cheese-making at a university in the north of Italy. We all talked, and before I went home, I had made arrangements for Professor Giovanni Marchesi to help me design a Brufani-style urban cheese factory in Dallas. For a modest stipend, he agreed to spend several weeks in Dallas once The Mozzarella Company was up and running. He was a tremendous help to

me during the planning and designing stages. He also helped me refine the art of cheese-making to meet the U.S. food manufacturing standards, which I had thoroughly researched. I returned to Dallas about a month later and began in earnest to search for property or an existing building to transform into an authentic Italian cheese factory.

How did you find a location for your factory?

I knew a lot about Dallas and zoning because of my experience with the Junior League. And I knew about small business because I worked for my husband when he founded his landscape company. I dragged out the zoning maps I'd used for those presentations and studied them all again. I went to city hall and found out that a cheese factory requires industrial zoning. Most of the industrial sites were in the suburbs or in some pretty undesirable parts of south Dallas. Then I noticed an industrial zone along the

eastern edge of downtown called "Deep Ellum," that had become a haven for musicians and artists. Creative types were working and living in old warehouse spaces because they were cheap and run-down, and because they were "cool." As I drove up and down Deep Ellum streets looking for a factory location, it was almost deserted. I saw a quaint storefront, a classic butcher shop, with a sign, "Randolph's Meat Market." I went in to talk to them, and as luck would have it, they owned a nearby, vacant corner drugstore. It was for lease, they said, but they didn't have a sign out, so it was fortunate, again, that I stopped to talk with them.

How did you go about evaluating this space to see if it would work for the cheese business?

I got the blueprints and called Giovanni to talk it over. I really liked the location because I felt it had the potential for growth and walk-in traffic in Deep Ellum. It was a charming



DETAILS

Lambert making mozzarella cheese.

LAMBERT'S WAY WI

The CEO of The Mozzarella Company of

Revelers are still on the streets of Deep Ellum, Dallas' thriving, alternative urban neighborhood, at 3:00 a.m., even during the work week. The downtown neighborhood is home to loft living, music clubs and bars, art galleries and avant-garde retail shops. Young trendsetters and old hipsters are calling it a night at about the same time the staff of cheese-makers at The Mozzarella Company begin their workday.

"We meet the milk trucks at about 3:00 each morning," company founder and CEO Paula Lambert says. "The tank trucks arrive very early, and we meet them to get the fresh milk pumped into our holding tanks behind the factory building." The milk is pasteurized by heating it to 145 degrees and maintaining the temperature for 30 minutes to kill any harmful bacteria. "We then cool the milk, and, depending on which type of cheese we are making, we will cool it or reheat to a certain temperature. We mix in beneficial bacteria cultures to make the milk coagulate. This produces curds, or the

brick building with a sidewalk in front and a large glass front door for curb appeal. Its wide-open space would become the factory. In a day or two, Giovanni had received and reviewed the blueprints, so we talked again and I signed the lease.

What else did you have to do before you could open?

I had a modest business plan, hoping to sell 100 pounds of mozzarella a week at first. Now we sell about 5,000 pounds a week. I compiled a list of local and regional contacts — restaurants, groceries, gourmet food shops and top chefs — for my sales calls. I had two investors, two employees and a building. In cheese-making, the processes, techniques and equipment define the factory layout. Giovanni had the most expertise in this area, plus I had detailed notes from my experience at Brufani's. I reviewed information on licensing, permitting and inspections from the Food and Drug Administra-

tion as well as from the city and state health departments. I made more than one call to the FDA in Washington to make sure we'd be in compliance. We had to completely remodel the building and install all the equipment. My husband's architecture background was a great help in remodeling.

What kind of equipment did you have to buy?

Timing and temperature sensitivity are the most critical elements in cheese-making, so we ordered the best heat sources, refrigerators, thermometers and timers we could find, plus specialized equipment and utensils. I talked to cheese-making equipment manufacturers in Wisconsin. Nowadays the American Cheese Society and New England Cheesemaking Supply are excellent sources. We bought a tiny, used delivery truck. We were as ready as we'd ever be. That's when I called and asked Giovanni to pack up and head for his Dallas sabbatical. He spent

three weeks with us. We made cheese every morning and ate it every afternoon. We practiced and practiced, until both process and product were perfect. I don't believe our cheeses would be as good or as authentic or as consistent if we'd made our start without Giovanni.

How did you find suppliers for cheese ingredients?

Our key supply need or raw material, of course, is milk. For cheese-making, we use fresh-off-the-farm raw milk. Through a list of local dairy farmers and dairy suppliers, I met dairy-equipment salesman extraordinaire Rodney Lockhart in Fort Worth. His help was invaluable — he helped me not only in finding high-quality used equipment, he introduced me to people in the dairy business in Dallas, from whom I got more good advice and found reliable, high-quality raw milk sources. More than once, Rodney would look at potential real estate with me. Involved in the dairy industry his

TH CURDS AND WHEY

fers a quick primer on cheese-making.



white solids, and whey, the liquid that contains mostly water. We cut the drained curd with cheese knives, which look like frames with stainless steel wires stretched across. We stir the curds to make certain kinds of cheese or press the curds into different-sized molds and incubate them until they mature."

For mozzarella, Lambert says, the curds are chopped and mixed with hot water. Then the cheese-makers "string" the cheese, which means pulling it into long strands. "After stringing, we stretch the cheese and form it into balls by hand," Lambert says. She explains that for other types of cheese curds are poured into perforated molds, so the whey drains out, leaving a wheel of cheese. "When gravity isn't enough, we add weights to press more of the whey out," she says. "We make a cheese called Montasio, which is a goat's milk cheese — a little bit like Parmesan but not as hard. It requires weights. With fresh cheeses, such as mozzarella, we package them to sell immediately. For aged cheeses, includ-

ing Montasio, we move them into the aging room." In the aging room, the cheeses ripen on stainless steel racks as cool air from fans on tall stands oscillate and circulate the air.

"In my cookbook I included simple steps to making cheese at home. I hope people will try it. I never could make it very well at my house," she says. "But then," Lambert laughs, "I didn't have to. I made mine at the factory."



Lambert making ricotta cheese.



The Mozzarella Company storefront in Dallas.

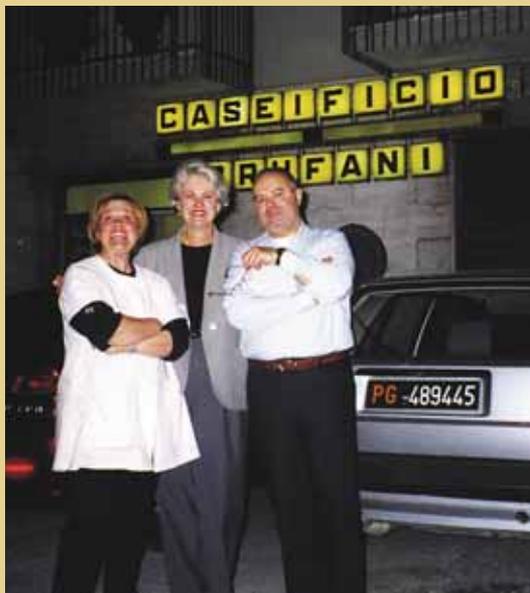
SUCCESS



Lambert (left) with students who attended a cooking class that she teaches twice a year in France at La Combe.



Awards won for their cheeses are displayed proudly at The Mozzarella Company factory.



Lambert with Mauro Brufani and his wife in front of Caseificio Brufani — Brufani's Cheese Factory — during a visit to Italy in 1990.

whole life, Rodney became my major cheerleader and wonderful consultant. He recently passed away.

Did your unique goal of reproducing and introducing a “foreign” product to U.S. markets present any unusual challenges?

I'd say the uniqueness of fresh mozzarella itself proved to be the most daunting challenge. It turned out that the concept was about two years ahead of trends in American cuisine toward fresh, handmade, globally inspired food. Back in 1982-83, there were few chefs other than Julia Child teaching cooking on television, and she concentrated on French cuisine. When I discovered fresh mozzarella in Italy, I wanted to recreate it for a relatively selfish reason. I hoped other people would try it and begin to crave it, just as I had.

So being a trendsetter, however inadvertent, isn't all it's cracked up to be?

Well, it wasn't for me — at first anyway. After Giovanni came and went, and we were working well and rolling out the mozzarella, I went personally to specialty grocery stores in North Texas, then in the Southwest region. Store managers seemed interested, but at first would only buy about five pounds, or 10 balls, of fresh mozzarella. I was diligent about keeping track of my new customers, and would schedule an enthusiastic return visit in two or three days — remember this was fresh cheese with a short shelf life. I'd ask, “How many pounds today?” They'd say, “Look. I have nine out of 10 balls still left here.” This went on for months, and I was losing money. I didn't know what to do. I thought that if I had additional cheeses to sell that I could turn the company around. So I went back to Italy to see Giovanni and his friends in northern Italy. I returned to Dallas with the ability to make excellent new cheeses — ricotta, caciotta, scamorza, crescenza and mascarpone. We immediately started experimenting in our factory to perfect them.

Did that help you turn it around?

Yes, and also I began making all the deliveries and talking more with all the old and potential customers. Dean Fearling had returned as executive chef at The Mansion on Turtle Creek. Stephan Pyles was starting Routh Street Café. These guys knew me. They represented a new breed of chefs, and each was determined to offer Dallasites access to new and unique tastes. I didn't realize that a lot of big cities were just beginning to experience the same thing. It all was coming together.

How did you find out that this new trend was beginning all over the U.S.?

In early 1985, I entered my cheeses in a competition of the American Cheese Society. I was surprised and thrilled to win several awards in the handmade cheese competition. That kind of recognition from the American Cheese Society started and kept the ball rolling for us. Later that year I went to a Symposium of the American Cuisine in San Francisco. I took coolers loaded with my new Italian cheeses that I passed out liberally to anyone who would bite. It turned out to be pivotal for the success of The Mozzarella Company because I met a lot of people who suddenly were eager to become my new customers — regardless of how far and how fast I would have to ship them fresh, artisan cheeses. We entered subsequent competitions of the American Cheese Society (www.cheesesociety.com) and won more awards.

So that was a pivotal meeting, and the challenge then became keeping up with new orders?

After that, the daunting challenge was threefold. We had to make enough cheese. We had to negotiate with air carriers for the best price and fastest turnaround for fresh cheese delivery out of our area. We had to stay on top of the critical distribution/shipping/delivery part of our business. We had to maintain a sharp focus on marketing to people who had become not only my friends, but also some of the

best-known, up-and-coming chefs in the U.S. Looking back, I think if we hadn't been ahead of these trends and started when we did, we wouldn't have been in a position to respond as well as we have. I just wish we hadn't had to suffer for nearly two years, but it certainly worked out for the best.

How do you market your product and get new customers? What is your advertising strategy now?

My strategy had been so heavily focused on the physical plant, the process, the product, my staff and building some key relationships, I hadn't spent too much time creating a marketing strategy. Now I don't really advertise. My Web site (www.mozzco.com) is really useful for promoting our cheeses. It's quick and direct, so that old and potential customers alike can see what's new. We have an online store, which features some of my best marketing ideas for retail sales.

What are some of those ideas?

I include a "Cheese of the Month Club," and customers can give one different cheese each month as a gift or join for themselves. We also offer a six-month club, with the choice of six consecutive months of cheese, or an every-other-month delivery plan. We make cheese sampler boxes and cheese gift baskets. The gift baskets often include a "Mozzarella Company" cap or t-shirt, or some related gourmet food items such as crackers or imported olive oils, that we buy from the top wholesalers such as Carrs for water crackers and Starr Ridge for American crackers. We always make seasonal cheeses, with holiday themes, and those are kept current on the Web site. For Valentine's Day, for example, we offer a "Mascarpone for Lovers" gift.

Do you have a sales effort for your wholesale customers, or do you also rely on the Web site?

I have had success with some inexpensive postcard direct-mail pieces to my large, nationwide customer base.

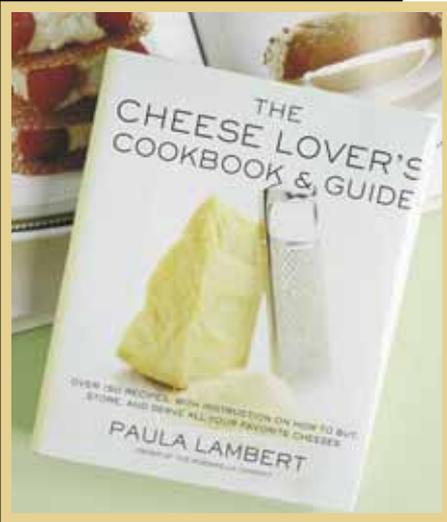
We use direct mail for retail customers as well as our wholesale customers. Each postcard highlights a new cheese or a reminder of a popular cheese. Sometimes I'll include a short recipe using the cheese or emphasize an interesting, seasonal cheese with a time-bound availability. For the wholesale crowd, we do a bit of telemarketing. We have such a good reputation with them. If there are ever any problems, we take care of them instantly. Keeping the product interesting and high quality, delivering on time, all those sorts of things, are a part of our successful marketing. We're reliable and we always have something new. They can also count on us for menu staples, such as fresh mozzarella.

What was your most unusual marketing strategy — and how well did it work?

When I came up with the Cheese of the Month Club, we got our first subscribers about 20 minutes after we added it to the Web site. I don't know if that's unusual, but I was truly amazed. It may be unusual to have such a focus on the product, product consistency and listening to our key customers. It works for me, and it works for the company.

Since most of your cheeses are purchased by specialty stores and high-end restaurants, are you disappointed that the retail side of your business doesn't play a larger role?

I suppose I am, particularly since that would have really reminded me of my wonderful times in Italy. European grocery shopping is still very decentralized, especially in the smaller towns. The everyday Italian shopper visits an open-air produce market or green-grocer's shop for fresh vegetables; the butcher shop for meat; the vintner's for spirits; the bakery for bread and pastries; and the cheese factory for fresh and aged cheeses. We have a bit of the Italian street-scene experience here, especially on Saturdays. Usually our customers will come down to Deep Ellum after they have shopped at the nearby



Dallas Farmer's Market or before a big party or a home-cooked dinner party. We visit as they select the cheeses they

need for the recipes, and my staff or I make sure they see what's new and get to taste everything.

Your business success led to a cookbook deal?

Yes, it did. I wrote *The Cheese Lover's Cookbook & Guide*, which came out in 2000 and is in its fifth printing now with Simon & Schuster. Now that was hard work. As usual, I overdid it and put tons of research — cheese lists by country of origin, cheese lists by type, a history of cheese, a discourse on cheese and nutrition, a resources section — in the book, in addition to 150 of my favorite recipes featuring cheese. I enjoyed the book tours and meeting people. We talk about Italy and about The Mozzarella Company. I've just started working on my second cookbook, which will be called *Cheese! Glorious Cheese!*

Paula Lambert is a hands-on business owner, she says, and she wouldn't have it any other way. "I used to pull on my rubber boots, my hat and my apron, and lug the raw milk into the factory when it was delivered in milk cans. That was tough." She advocates getting a high-quality product right first, and then helping its word-of-mouth reputation along in sensible, budget-conscious ways. When she explains her very classical cheeses, produced by hand in the Italian tradition, she says, "Someone always asks, 'Why don't you just make it with machines?'" Her practiced answer is to describe The Mozzarella Company's brand-new cheese, called Banca Bianca. "I tell them how we gently wash this pale cheese by hand with white wine every day as it ages. Then I say, 'Shoot! What kind of a machine could ever do that?'" MB

CHEESE-MAKERS RESOURCES

RULES, REGULATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

City Departments of Health

Local public health departments may require inspections and permitting for a cheese factory, especially one that offers retail sales. Check local directories or Web sites for specific information for your area.

U.S. Department of Agriculture
www.usda.gov

Food and Drug Administration
www.fda.gov

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

American Dairy Association
www.ilovecheese.com

National Dairy Council
www.nationaldairycouncil.org

International Dairy Foods Association
www.idfa.org

Represents: Milk Industry Foundation (MIF), National Cheese Institute (NCI) and International Ice Cream Association (IICA).

American Dairy Goat Association
www.adga.org

SUPPLIES AND SERVICES

Paula Lambert's recommendations:

American Cheese Society
www.cheese.com

California Cheese and Butter Association
www.cacheeseandbutter.org

Cheese from Spain
www.cheesefromspain.com

The Cheese Reporter
www.cheesereporter.com

The Great Cheeses of New England
www.newenglandcheese.com

Vermont Cheese Council
www.vtcheese.com

Paula's favorite supplier:
New England Cheesemaking Supply
www.cheesemaking.org

BOOKS ABOUT CHEESE AND CHEESE-MAKING

The Cheese Lover's Cookbook & Guide
By Paula Lambert
Simon and Schuster, 2000

A Guide to the World of Cheese and Cheese-making
By Bruno Battistotti
New York Facts on File, 1983

Cheeses of the World
By Juliet Harbutt
Lorenz Press, 1999

Cheesemaking Practice
By R. K. Robinson and R. A. Wilbey
Aspen Publishers, 1998

Wisconsin Cheesecyclopedia
Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, 1995
Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, Inc.
www.wisdairy.com

THE MOZZARELLA COMPANY

www.mozzco.com
214.741.4072