

From Italy to America's Heartland

BY DAVID GIBBONS

For warm-weather recipes, my thoughts always run to simple, elegant, two- or three-ingredient combinations that take maximum advantage of seasonal bounty and highlight some of the many wonderful complements and contrasts to be found with fine cheeses.

Among my favorites are shaved fennel and Parmigiano-Reggiano salad with toasted pine nuts; cherry tomatoes stuffed with chèvre and topped with fried capers; and endive boats with a Roquefort-crème fraîche spread—all ideal for family-style alfresco dining.

Then, of course, there's *insalata caprese*, the most magnificent, harmonious trio ever devised—fresh mozzarella, juicy, ripe tomatoes and just-picked basil. Not only does it strike a perfect balance of tastes and textures, but it delights the eye with its reflection of Italy's hallowed green, white and red *tricolore*. It's long been my default late-summer side dish or lunch plate. But, more important, it inspired a down-home Southern girl raised on grits and ham to become a legendary figure among America's fine-cheese pioneers.

If there were a Cheese Hall of Fame, Paula Lambert would be a unanimous first-ballot selection. At 71, the founder and president of The Mozzarella Co. is a tireless bundle of energy and a ubiquitous ambassador for U.S. production of artisanal cheeses.

Lambert's passion for fine cheeses dates back to the late 1960s, when she launched a lifelong love affair with Italy. "Starting that first day I came through the tunnel from Switzerland, I loved everything about it," she recalls. "The landscape was beautiful, the colors, everything." She went to Perugia to study Italian and art history. "One summer turned into five years."

Once back home in Dallas, she thought of starting a pasta-making business, but found another local entrepreneur had beaten her to it. So she turned to cheese. It was 1982 and nobody around had heard of fresh mozzarella: Even the Mansion on Turtle Creek, already a gourmet din-



Paula Lambert founded The Mozzarella Co. in 1982.

ing destination, was using a mass-produced supermarket version.

Over the years, Lambert built a business supplying her region with fresh mozzarella, made daily by hand with top-quality milk, the traditional Italian way. She has also created a number of other cooking-friendly cheeses, including the distinguished American original, Hoja Santa, a leaf-wrapped, aged goat's milk gem.

Lambert's two books are go-to sources for everything related to cooking with cheese. The first, *The Cheese Lover's Cookbook & Guide* (Simon & Schuster, 2000) is chock-full of basic recipes and ideas, providing adventurous home chefs with a solid framework for experimenting and creating their own dishes.

The recipes in her second book, *Glorious Cheese: More Than 75 Tempting Recipes for Cheese Lovers Everywhere* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), are more sophisticated and complex while remaining fun and reliable. A favorite:

Warm Goat Cheese with Sun-Dried Tomato Coulis, made with Hoja Santa and paired with a Sauvignon Blanc.

Despite being en route to Tuscany for one of her *Viaggi Deliziosi* tours, Lambert fulfilled my request for an original, previously unpublished recipe with one she has taught often in her classes there.

I love this recipe because it's as festive and delicious as it is quick and easy to prepare. It incorporates the holy trinity of mozzarella, tomato and basil, playing it off the subtle flavors of eggplant and gaining a nice salty edge from the capers and prosciutto. The cheese, baked, pulls all the flavors together in beautiful harmony and accentuates the dish's summery southern Italian roots. It's doable anywhere you can find ripe tomatoes and genuine fresh mozzarella, which includes greater expanses of our country than ever, thanks to cheese artisans like Paula Lambert.

Wines that would match this dish well include a fruity yet balanced Chianti or other Sangiovese-based red, or a crisp white such as a Vernaccia di San Gimignano or a Vermentino.

David Gibbons is co-author of *Mastering Cheese*.

PAULA LAMBERT'S INVOLTINI DI MELANZANE (EGGPLANT ROLLS)

2 large eggplants (1½ to 2 pounds each)
2 teaspoons salt
4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more to brush eggplant and pan
1 small yellow onion, diced
1 large clove garlic, minced
2 pints ripe cherry tomatoes, roughly chopped
1 tablespoon capers, minced
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
½ pound thinly sliced prosciutto
1 pound fresh mozzarella, thinly sliced
1 cup loosely packed basil leaves, julienned
1 cup loosely packed parsley leaves, julienned

1. Preheat an oven to 350° F. Prepare an outdoor grill with the rack about 8 inches from the heat. Cut each eggplant lengthwise into 8 slices about ¼-inch thick, discarding the stem ends and all-skin sides. Sprinkle evenly with salt and drain in a colander for 15 to 20 minutes.
2. Pat the eggplant slices dry. Brush one side with olive oil and grill (or broil), oiled side toward the heat, for 2 to 3 minutes, until lightly browned. Repeat the process on the other side.
3. Add 4 tablespoons oil to a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté 2 to 3 minutes; add the garlic and sauté another minute.

Add tomatoes and cook, stirring occasionally, about 5 minutes. Remove the sauce from the heat, stir in capers, and season with salt and pepper.

4. Lightly brush a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with olive oil. Place the browned eggplant slices on a large cutting board. Cover each slice with one layer of prosciutto, followed by a layer of mozzarella. Roll up each eggplant slice, beginning with the smaller end. Arrange the involtini, seam-side down, in the baking dish. Evenly distribute the tomato sauce on top. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes.

5. Remove the involtini from the oven, and sprinkle with basil and parsley. Serves 8.