

All Smoked Up!

Smoked mozzarella provides endless opportunities

Story by Katie Ayoub
Photo by Melissa Mann

Smoked mozzarella resides eons away from the mild fresh mozzarella, and even farther away from factory-produced mozzarella. Operators who menu smoked mozzarella wax poetic about its smoky, fresh-milk flavor and creamy texture. They add it to pizzas, salads, pastas and appetizers. But they do so with a light touch, warning that too much of a powerfully good thing is, perhaps, not such a good thing.

Smoked mozzarella, or *mozzarella affumicata* in Italian, starts out as fresh mozzarella, a mild, white cheese made from either water buffalo's milk or cow's milk. Cheese makers use the pasta filata method to make the fresh mozzarella, dipping the curd into hot whey, then stretching and kneading it to the desired consistency. Choices in product vary from domestic to imported, mild-smoked to heavy. Some smoke their cheese in-house, others leave it to trusted purveyors. Cow's milk, or a combination of cow's milk with water buffalo milk's mozzarella, seems to be the product of choice.



Add strips of prosciutto or salami for extra flavor and depth.

Penne Rigate with Smoked Mozzarella and Asparagus Tips

Yield: 6 servings

- ¾ pound asparagus, cut diagonally into 1-inch sticks
- 12 ounces penne rigate (quill noodles)
- 3 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves (or 1 teaspoon dried)
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¾ pound smoked mozzarella, cut into small cubes

Bring salted water to a boil in a large saucepot. Add the asparagus; cook three minutes until tender, but still crisp. Drain the asparagus, then shock in cold water to stop further cooking. Using the same boiling water, cook pasta until al dente. In the meantime in a separate pan, heat 1 tablespoon olive oil over medium heat; add onion, sauté five minutes. Reduce heat to low; add garlic and sauté three minutes. Stir in asparagus, thyme leaves and salt. Cook for 5 minutes. Drain pasta, reserving ½ cup of pasta water. Return pasta to the pot; toss with remaining olive oil. Add reserved pasta water to the sauce; stir. Combine pasta with the sauce, then add cubes of smoked mozzarella. Toss well. Serve immediately so that the cheese melts from the heat of the pasta and sauce.

Smoking methods for mozzarella are as varied as those used in Southern barbecue. Wood chips vary from pecan to applewood, length in the smoker from seconds to minutes, but the goal remains the same - a wonderful clean-tasting cheese with an added depth of smokiness.

At Pizza Nea in Minneapolis, a two-unit upscale pizza shop, smoked mozzarella is featured in several of its pizzas. The most popular item is the Quattro Formaggi, which stars fresh mozzarella, Gorgonzola picante, smoked mozzarella and Parmigiano-Reggiano. The dough is spread with crushed tomatoes, topped with the cheese, then sea salt and a bit of olive oil. A 10½-inch pie sells for \$11.

Owner Mike Sherwood chooses an Italian smoked mozzarella and his purveyor delivers a 2-pound braid every two days.

"It's the best. It is truly wood-smoked, and it's expensive, but worth it," says Sherwood. "I sell expensive pizzas, but I cover my cost like any other full-service restaurant and use the three-times-food-cost for menu price. We're not fast-casual."

Pizza Nea also menus a Caprino e Treccione pizza that's topped with goat cheese, smoked mozzarella, artichokes, sun-dried tomatoes, garlic, pine nuts and crushed tomatoes. In the Rucola pizza, smoked mozzarella shares space with arugula, Parmigiano-Reggiano, prosciutto and crushed tomatoes. And in the Boscaiola, the smoked mozzarella is complemented with porcini mushrooms, red onion, parsley, Parmigiano-Reggiano and black pepper.

Sherwood advises judiciousness when adding the smoked mozzarella. "Don't use too much. It's very flavorful and can overpower the other cheeses and toppings. The wood-smoking creates so much flavor — a little goes a long way," he says.

Ella's in Washington D.C. uses a domestic smoked mozzarella on its menu. Last winter, this 80-seat shop menued a successful salad of an oven-roasted portobello on a bed of arugula, smoked mozzarella, pears and spice walnuts. (It sold for \$11.50.)

"It was really popular. I'm going to do something similar for spring and summer because it worked so well — I'll just switch out the pears and nuts for something else," says Ed Hanson, chef/owner.

The Pucillo pizza, which Hanson calls "my

version of a BLT with cheese," features tomato sauce and smoked mozzarella. Once out of the wood oven, it's topped with prosciutto and arugula, then finished with a drizzle of olive oil.

He uses a domestic smoked mozzarella, which comes in small balls. "It doesn't have a high food cost and it's really versatile. The smoked mozzarella is drier than the fresh so it won't go too soft on you. I also chose a mild smoked one, which works well for me," says Hanson.

And then there's Pizzeria Bianco, a 42-seat eclectic pizza shop in Phoenix. Chef/owner Chris Bianco smokes his own mozzarella, then features it on the Wiseguy, a popular pizza with fennel-laced sausage, wood-roasted Arizona sweet onion and the house-smoked mozzarella.

"If you break down the flavors of the pizza — the headiness of the cheese, the fattiness of the pork and the sweetness of the onions with the background of the fennel — it balances really well," says Bianco.

He also cautions to use the smoked mozzarella sparingly. "It can overpower if you use too much. We're going for intense smoke with our mozzarella, so you have to balance it with other flavors," he says.

To smoke the cheese, Bianco starts with a domestic mozzarella. He chills it, then puts it in an old metal proofing box. He places hot coals from his oven on a cast-iron skillet under the box, sprinkles the coals with pecan chips (or sometimes applewood), then lets the cheese absorb the smoke for approximately 20 minutes.

"Whenever you're smoking, taste it. That goes for all recipes or procedures, right? There are only outlines, no gospel," says Bianco. "You have no idea how many times I had to burn the cheese or start fires before I got the smoking right."

Although smoking the cheese in-house may lower food cost, higher labor cost counteracts any possible savings. "You have to do it because you love doing it. I make it because I love it. There's a sense of nobility in its simplicity," he says. ♦

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