

Mozzarella manager

A 22-YEAR-OLD THAI BECOMES AN ITALIAN CHEESE WHIZ

SIRIN P WONGPANIT
The Nation

Looks deceive, Veda Balankura may appear dainty, but this 22-year-old is a business pro in a profession that few Thais know anything about.

Veda co-manages an Italian cheese factory in Hua Hin and a distribution centre in Bangkok. She knows her mozzarella from her ricotta, scamorza and mascarpone and has

done every-thing from packing the cheeses to selling them, to delivering them herself.

At Del Casaro cheeses, she works with two Italian partners, Max Mazzalai and Eddy Uber, who are based in Hua Hin. She handles marketing and administration from Bangkok. Veda has extensive kitchen experience gleaned from studying the travel industry and hotel management at Mahidol University. Every summer vacation, she would train in the university's kitchens and at local five-star hotels, mixing flour and baking pastries for guests.

She joined the cheese business after graduating from the international programme when her mother partnered with Mazzalai and Uber.

"When we started, Mark and Eddy were making their cheeses in Hua Hin, but they didn't have a Bangkok office. So we decided to start one here," explains

the soft-spoken Veda. "Since we were very small, I did everything - taking orders, packing cheeses and hopping in the pick-up truck to deliver each item. It was difficult, but I learnt a lot. I also understood what it felt like to be a delivery girl and got to know all my customers well."

Getting into the Italian cheese business means eating out at as many Italian restaurants as possible. When Veda went out with friends, they'd invariably end up at the Italian restaurant of her choice. Pasta, pizza, cazones and frisutti were part of her daily diet.

"My friends understood, but they couldn't help but being a bit sarcastic about my obsession with Italian cheeses and restaurants," Veda says. "Whenever we tried to figure where to eat back then, we always ended up at an Italian restaurant because I was looking for business opportunities. I staked out good

Italian restaurants and always left my name card."

Being a novice, and being humble, worked to Veda's advantage.

"I'd always tell the chefs that I'd be honoured to have them as my customer," she said. "I never boasted, saying our cheeses are the best. I just let them try our products and got them to understand how much their business meant to us. Most of the time, they became our account."

Del Casaro now serves more than 150 establishments, including many leading hotels in Hua Hin and Bangkok. Veda oversees distribution and service, and she makes day-to-day decisions regarding the company's operation.

"My job includes taking care of existing and potential customers and settling their accounts," she says. "I oversee the delivery system to make sure our cheeses reach our customers on time daily."

And since she has worked as a delivery girl, she understands the entire system and can help mentor her distribution staff and field complaints from customers.

"Working in delivery has helped me understand people. The more I understand them, the better service I can provide," Veda says. "But if I have problems I can't solve, I still go to my mom or Eddy for advice. They've been around a lot longer than me and are my mentors in running this business."



Veda Balankura and her business partners, Max Mazzalai (left) and Eddy Uber (right)

Mama would have loved it

A lot of the cheese you savour at top Thai hotels comes from an Italian in Hua Hin. Just ask for 'Cheese boy'

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MAX MAZZALAI is an Italian - from Trieste, north of Milan, to be exact. Ask him why he now lives in Hua Hin and the answer will be something like, "I just follow the cows".

But Max has always loved the sea. He moved from Koh Tao to Koh Samui and then, looking for a good source of milk, to Hua Hin five years ago. His work is curing fresh Italian cheese for local restaurants and diners.

"The art of cheese-making is something I inherited," explains the 39-year-old Mazzalai. "In the town where I lived, each family used to have its own cow for fresh milk, and cheese-making came naturally."

While tourists come and go, Mazzalai opted to stay in Thailand after his late-'90s visit. His cheese business started out simply.

"I was looking for something I could do to earn my living and found there were lots of local Italian restaurants that might need my cheese. So I tried."

And his efforts paid off. His fresh cheese, ranging from fresh mozzarella in water to mozzarella loafs for pizza, were popular among cheese-lovers as well as restaurant-owners in Samui.

But soon fresh milk became rare on the island, and Mazzalai moved to Hua Hin, where he teamed up with Veda Balankura, a 22-year-old whose family had been a long-time client, to increase his supply.

And from a humble beginning, they established a proper cheese factory under the name of Del Casaro in the Bo Fai area, serving fresh cheese to more than 150 establishments in Thailand, including almost all the five-star hotels in Hua Hin and a handful in Bangkok.

"I am proud that we can produce such cheese in Thailand," says Veda, who started this business at age 16 while studying at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.

"With good-quality local milk and the expertise of an Italian cheese-maker like Max, we're able to produce good-quality cheese to match and - according to many local Italian chefs - excel the imported ones."

Although the growth of his business has been brisk, Mazzalai insists on the traditional style of cheese-making.

Each morning, he imports and gets fresh milk from a farm run by the Dairy Farming Promotion Organisation in Prachuab and gets going. The first batch usually comes out about 1pm, and according to Veda, that's the best time to try the cheese.

Currently, Del Casaro produces six types of cheese: mozzarella (fresh in water and dry for pizza), ricotta (classic and smoked), italico (light with herbs and classic), creamy mascarpone, scamorza (classic and smoked),

The prices range from Bt200 a kilo for pizza mozzarella to Bt220 to Bt400 for fresh mozzarella in water, depending on the variety (available in sheet, bocconcini and bow) and Bt200 to Bt240 for the ricotta and Bt250 to Bt550 for scamorza.

And those who avoid cheese to stay lean should think again. Ricotta and mozzarella, made from milk, are good sources of calcium. Italico light is even lower in fat, according to Veda, and is best served with crackers during breakfast.

"My mother is a cheese-lover, and she's made all of us love it as well," says Veda, who despise her obsession with cheese has a svelte figure.

"I love eating cubes of mozzarella with fresh tomatoes. That's a good source of nutrition and is much better [and lower in fat] than any other snacks."

Mazzalai recommends replacing cream cheese with ricotta in a cheesecake. The light, crumbly cheese is also delicious by itself or when stuffed in ravioli or sprinkled onto a pasta dish.

Or, if you so wish, a spoonful of fresh ricotta from the fridge gives you enough energy and nutrition to start your day.

Although Del Casaro is based in Hua Hin, Bangkok customers can place their orders by phone. Delivery

is made to retail customers who live in the city centre for a small charge. Also, fresh supplies can be bought from its office near Charoen Nakorn.

"Local production reduces the price of the cheese," says Veda. "And without compromising taste and quality, we can supply good cheese without straining the wallets of customers," she adds.

Del Casaro (Italian for 'The Cheese') can be contacted at (02) 863-3093-4 or in Hua Hin at (032) 922-749. Its products should be available at local supermarkets soon.

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A KING'S RANSOM IN GOOD TASTE: Veda Balankura with a selection of Del Casaro cheeses