

Big Cheese

Italian mountaineer brings the art of mozzarella to Hua Hin

PETER JANSSEN
HUA HIN, DPA

How does a former ski resort employee from the mountainous region of Trentino in northern Italy end up making mozzarella cheese in a Thai beach resort?

"Just fate," says Max Mazzalai, the 42-year-old founder of Del Casaro Thailand Company of Hua Hin, the proud producer of mozzarella, ricotta, Italic, mascarpone and scamorza cheeses.

Eleven years ago, Mr Mazzalai recalls, he visited Koh Samui resort as a tourist. "I came for a holiday but saw there was a lot of potential to make cheese because there were many Italian, French and German restaurants on the island."

In Trentino, he had worked at ski resorts during the winter months and helped raise dairy cows and make cheese in the summer.

At least his cheese-making talents proved exportable to tropical Thailand, where mass tourism and a resulting explosion of Italian restaurants over the past two decades have created a domestic market for mozzarella, the main ingredient for pizza, and other cooking cheeses such as ricotta.

By Dec 1, 1997, after a quick trip home to buy equipment, Mr Mazzalai was the first mozzarella maker on Samui.

In 2000, he shifted his cheese factory to Hua Hin, and brought in Eddy Uber, 37, also from Trentino and Thai national Veda Balabkura as business partners.

Del Casaro is now one of Thailand's leading suppliers of mozzarella cheese to hotels and restaurants in Bangkok, Pattaya, Hua Hin, Samui, Phuket, Phangnga and Koh Tao.

The small cheese factory, on the outskirts of Hua Hin town, will finish its first major expansion within four months, after which it may be able to open a souvenir shop selling cheeses to visiting tourists, said Mr Uber.

Del Casaro takes pride in using traditional Italian cheese-making methods and producing high-quality items that can compete with Italian imports.

"Many chefs like to use our cheese because they say it is good quality and fresh," said Mr Uber.

Del Casaro is not the only mozzarella maker in Thailand.

Minor Group, the owner of The Pizza



Workers make cheese in the Del Casaro factory run by Max Mazzalai in Hua Hin. EPA

Company restaurant chain, has been making its own mozzarella for more than a decade, and at least three other companies are in the mozzarella business, including Murrah Dairy Farm which four months ago introduced Thailand's first buffalo mozzarella.

Italy's most famous mozzarella, from the Campania area in the south, is made with water buffalo milk. Legend has it that the water buffaloes were imported from India 500 years ago and cross-bred with African buffaloes to create a creature well-suited to the hot and swampy Campania region.

There is little doubt that buffalo milk makes a better mozzarella. It has twice as much fat as regular cow milk.

Unfortunately, the milk of the average Thai water buffalo, used for field labour rather than milking, is inferior to that of its Campania cousins.

That may change soon, if the Murrah Dairy Farm example takes off.

Murrah Dairy Farm in Chachoengsao province has successfully artificially inseminated Thai water buffaloes with Murrah buffalo sperm from Bulgaria,



Mazzalai: Not ready to work 15-hour days

and now has a buffalo herd producing 150 litres of milk per day.

The buffalo milk, primarily sold to Thai Muslims of Indian origin, is also being used to make mozzarella cheese.

"We just opened a shop in Ramkhamhaeng Soi 112 in Bangkok," said Charinee Chaiyochlarb, the farm's marketing manager, who last year spent two months at a mozzarella factory in Campania to learn how to make the precious cheese.

Del Casaro in Hua Hin was originally interested in using the Murrah Dairy Farm buffalo milk to produce its own mozzarella, but decided against it because the milk would spoil en route to Hua Hin, a five-hour drive.

Of course, Del Casaro could start its own Murrah buffalo farm in Hua Hin, and fulfill Mr Mazzalai's dream of exporting mozzarella back to Italy.

But Mr Mazzalai has reservations. "No, no," he says to starting a buffalo dairy farm. "When I came to Thailand I came for a better life. So if I have to work 15 hours a day, I'm back to where I came from."