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Subject: [Clipping-Cooking] Chef stresses freshness, right down to cheese

Chef stresses freshness, right down to cheese

By Deborah M. Schneider
March 17, 2004 in the San Diego Union-Tribune

At Region restaurant in Hillcrest, the feel is 21st-century rustic, but in the kitchen, a back-to-the-roots cooking revolution is bubbling away.

"I want to make everything from scratch," says pastry chef Jack Fisher. "Prosciutto. Aged cheeses."

Fisher, casual in a T-shirt and sugar-crusted blue canvas apron, plus ringing cell phone, was preparing to make fresh mozzarella for the evening service while calmly instructing cook Dionicio Benito in the finer points of caramel ice cream and Meyer lemon semifreddo.

Fisher makes fresh mozzarella every day and serves it drizzled with fruity olive oil on a simple appetizer plate with olives, prosciutto and crostini.

It sells out nightly. At a recent dinner, the creamy/crumby texture of a fresh ricotta, also house-made, accented sauteed greens with fresh pasta.

Why would busy chefs bother making their own fresh cheeses? Fisher (along with owners Michael Stebner and Allyson Colwell) cite as their inspiration restaurants like Artisan in New York and Paul Bertolli's Oliveto in the Bay Area, where hand-made foods are showcased, and chefs grow or craft much of what they serve.

In the 1970s and '80s, Chez Panisse and chef Alice Waters did something similar, reinventing a style of simple, hand-made, rustic food that also managed to be terribly chic.

This atelier philosophy has fueled microbrewery beers, boutique

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wineries and the long-awaited return of decent bread. And now, cheese. In San Diego, having a hand-made, local product means, in some cases, making it yourself.

Fisher's tender fresh mozzarella and creamy, dreamy ricotta are both made from off-the-shelf cow's milk.

For the mozzarella, he uses two natural additives, citric acid and lipase powder, which take the place of the enzymes that would appear during the ripening process in unpasteurized, unrefrigerated milk.

Fisher pulls out a couple of gallons of pasteurized whole milk. "Any brand will do," he says, "as long as it's not ultra-pasteurized" (heat-treated to beyond 180 degrees).

He empties the milk into a well-used heavy pot, casually stabbing the bottoms of the jugs with a knife to speed the glugging milk along.

Making the mozzarella is surprisingly quick and simple. Cold milk is combined with the citric acid and lipase and heated over a moderate flame, while a crushed rennet tablet dissolves slowly in spring water. When the milk is exactly 88 degrees, Fisher stirs in the dissolved rennet.

A few seconds later, fueled by heat and the coagulant, the milk suddenly blooms into clouds of rubbery, pure white curd suspended in whey: newborn mozzarella. Fisher skims the curd into china bowls and heads for the microwave.

This is where the fun begins. Fisher dons latex gloves to protect his hands, works a sprinkling of fine sea salt into the curd, and zaps it in the microwave for a full minute on high.

Working quickly, he presses the hot curd into a ball, squeezing out as much liquid as possible, and folds the curd back upon itself. The process of heating, squeezing, kneading and folding is repeated again and again. Each time, the texture of the cheese changes: from cottage cheesy lumps to rubbery mass to firm, smooth ball. While he works, the temperature of the cheese feels like uncomfortably hot bath water.

After five or six passes through the microwave/kneading process, the finished cheese is a supple wave of pure white with a smooth, waxy sheen. Fisher gives it one last fold and drops it into the bowl; it looks like a gigantic wad of chewing gum.

The finished cheese is shaped into smooth balls with a practiced twirling motion that Fisher says he learned from years of making sugar swans, and the finished cheese is plopped back into the whey to cool.

The entire production takes about 30 minutes and yields about 2 1/2 pounds of melt-in-your-mouth perfection - firm yet tender, with the sweet floral taste of fresh milk.

I ask him how else his fresh mozzarella can be served, but Fisher demurs; he likes his cheese au naturel. "I'm just waiting for tomato season," he says with a grin.

Jack Fisher adapted his recipe from "Home Cheese Making" (Storey Books) by Ricki Carroll, owner of New England Cheesemaking Supply. A properly calibrated Taylor instant-read thermometer is essential, since the rennet is very sensitive.

Region's Fresh Mozzarella
Makes about 2 1/2 pounds

2 gallons whole pasteurized milk (not ultra-pasteurized)
3 teaspoons citric acid (see note)
Heaping 1/2 teaspoon Lipase 3 powder (see note)
1/2 rennet tablet, crushed and dissolved in 1/2 cup spring water (see note)
1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt

Pour cold milk into a 3-gallon, heavy bottomed pot. Add citric acid and lipase powder and stir thoroughly; small lumps will form. Heat over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until milk reaches exactly 88 degrees. Stir in the dissolved rennet and keep stirring as the curds form and the temperature climbs to exactly 105 degrees. This happens quickly. Keep stirring gently.

When curds and whey are separated, turn off the heat and skim the curds with a fine skimmer into two microwave-proof bowls. Reserve the whey. Put on latex or rubber gloves. Press as much liquid as possible out of the curds, draining it off, and work the sea salt well into the curds.

Microwave on high for 60 seconds. Quickly press curds down to force out more liquid, and squish and knead the curd into a rough ball. Microwave again for 20 seconds or a little more, and repeat the process; knead by flattening out the mass and then folding it back on top of itself several times. Repeat the heating, pressing, draining and kneading process five or six times without allowing the cheese to cool; the curds must be uncomfortably hot but still bearable to the touch.

The cheese is done when it is smooth, bouncy and shiny, and the outside stretches into strands when it is folded. Transfer whey to a storage container. Form cheese into balls and drop into whey. Cool with plastic wrap pressed onto surface of whey, and refrigerate until needed. Bring to room temperature before serving. Keeps two to three days, refrigerated, though the cheese is at its best when eaten immediately.

Note: Vegetable rennet is sold at Whole Foods La Jolla, but it doesn't work as reliably as animal rennet. Animal rennet, lipase, citric acid and other supplies are available from New England Cheesemaking Supply Company at (413) 628-3808, or online at www.cheesemaking.com.

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