MELTING POT

Authentic mozzarella in Bengal! Where there’s a will, there’s a way

BY INDRANI SEN

Since I was a child visiting my Indian-born father’s family in Calcutta, I have adored Indian flatbreads—pillowy naans, buttery parathas, whole-wheat chapattis, and more. Being half-Italian, though, I’ve always craved a slice of flatbread in India: pizza. The country’s biggest cities now boast such chains as Pizza Hut and Domino’s, but the pizzas those places sell are, as a rule, dismal when compared with the crunchy, olive-oil-rubbed squares I’ve devoured in Rome, the light-yet-chewy thin-crust pies native to Naples, and the satisfying, cheesy slices I eat in New York City, where I now live. The pitfalls of Indianized pizza are many, but none are more dispiriting to me than the cheese: usually processed spreads or packaged slices. That’s why I was delighted to find Fire and Ice, a Calcutta pizzeria

that opened in 2005. When I first visited the restaurant, a grandmother in a sari and a sultry teenager playing a handheld video game shared a pizza at one table, while a hip, young couple caroused at another. The pizzeria attracts a steady flow of upwardly mobile Calcuttans, who have developed a taste for the establishment’s Neapolitan-style pizzas. The thin-crust pies are minimally topped, and the mozzarella is perfect: milky and rich, moist but not oily, bubbly and toasted brown in spots.

How, I wondered, did they come by mozzarella like this in Calcutta? When I phoned Fire and Ice’s owner, Annapurna Forgione, to find out, she told me an interesting tale of global intersections. In 1988, Forgione, a Neapolitan, moved to Kathmandu, Nepal, with her husband, a Brit who had accepted a teaching job there. When she started her first pizza parlor in the city, she called Fire and Ice. 14 years ago, she made do at first with a locally made cows’ milk cheese, called kanchan, but found it to be heavier than she liked. Importing fresco mozzarella from Italy was prohibitively expensive because of high excise taxes and bureaucratic tangles. Still, Forgione wasn’t willing to compromise. “I like to do things the way they’re done in Italy,” she said. “I want people to know how it would taste there.” After reading up on Italian mozzarella and consulting with a Danish-run dairy in Nepal that was working with local farmers on improving the quality of their milk, Forgione developed a technique in which she mixed cows’ milk with the higher-fat milk of buffalos, which makes the mozzarella softer. Initially there were setbacks: the Danish government canceled its dairy project, and a cheese-making facility Forgione set up in her house didn’t pan out, because transporting the milk there required refrigeration that made it unsuitable for the production of cheese. Eventually, though, Forgione partnered with a Nepalese farmer named Achyut Ghimire, who was able to provide the milk, and, following Forgione’s specifications, make the mozzarella herself. By mid-2005, Fire and Ice Kathmandu was a local institution, and Forgione decided the time was right to open a branch in India. She settled on Calcutta and rew Ghimire to train two young Bengali men in her mozzarella technique. All she needed now was a reliable source of milk. As luck would have it, the Italian consulate in Calcutta was interested in funding a dairy farm but didn’t quite know where to start. Further inquiries led Forgione to the Institute for Indian Mother and Child, a charity that runs a rural health and education project south of Chandani Samanta, a mozzarella maker at the Institute for Indian Mother and Child’s Mozzarella Unit in West Bengal, India, above.

INDRANI SEN’S most recent article for SAVOUR was “Sweet Leaf” (November 2007).
THE LUSH BANANA GROVES OUTSIDE WERE WORLDS AWAY FROM ITALY, YET THE TWO MEN CARRIED OUT THE RITUALS OF ITALIAN CHEESE MAKING WITH PRACTICED EASE

curry with spinach and mustard greens, and paner bhori, a scrambled eggs—like preparation. I felt fairly certain, however, that Satya Bhattacharyya and Chandan Samanta were the only mozzarella makers in all of West Bengal when I visited them at the Mozzarella Unit. Their work space looked like a science classroom, with its massive steel pans and kerosene burner. The lush banana groves outside were worlds away from Campania, Italy, where mozzarella is thought to have originated in the 12th century. Yet the two men carried out the rituals of Italian cheese making with practiced ease: condensing the milk with citric acid and rennet, draining the whey, and slicing the curds.

Bhandary, sitting on a low stool, placed the curd slices in a metal pot. When they had mched, he folded the solid mass in half and pressed down, then folded and pressed again. He stretched the cheese above his head and dropped it back into the pot, repeating the motions a few times. Then he folded and folded and folded again. Next, in a quick, fluid motion, he gathered the edges to form a ball, which he lowered into a saltwater bath, where it would soak for three hours before being prepared for delivery to Fire and Ice.

Samanta plucked off a morel of the warm, fresh cheese for me to try. The taste was pure Italy, but the image it brought to my mind was that of a young woman in a green sari, brushing her cow with maternal tenderness. For Forgione, too, the project is as much about people as it is about cheese. "I think to be successful," she told me, "you have to create success for others, too."

The Pantry, page 96: More information about Fire and Ice Pizzeria.