

# Dallas' Mozzarella Co. puts gourmet spin on cottage cheese

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Cottage cheese seems an unlikely quest for a top Dallas chef.



EVANS CAGLAGE/DMN

**Mozzarella Company's** stereotype-defying cottage cheese is the first cheese Mitchell Whitley has made from scratch.

The supermarket version is so linked to the diner-style diet plate – canned peaches, anyone? – that it's hard to imagine such a thing as a gourmet cottage cheese.

But that's what Kent Rathbun wanted for his new restaurant, Rathbun's Blue Plate Kitchen. He coaxed the Dallas-based Mozzarella Company into creating a voluptuous cottage cheese that shatters the stereotype with an incomparable richness and distinctive, tangy flavor.

Like all cottage cheeses, it's a simple, mild, fresh cheese made from cow's milk; the curds are kept loose and retain a little of the whey.

The Mozzarella Company's version is the handiwork of a relative newcomer to cheese making, Mitchell Whitley. Mozzarella Company owner Paula Lambert typically shepherds all cheese development, but she entrusted this project to Whitley, her factory manager of three years. The Frisco native managed an East Texas cooking school before joining Mozzarella Company, but she has no culinary training.

"It was her first time to make a cheese from scratch, without a recipe," Lambert says.

Whitley hit a home run. With large, luxurious curds swathed in cream and crème fraîche, this whole-milk cottage cheese is a far cry from the mass-produced variety. Call it the Susan Boyle of cheeses: a humble, surprising star that wowed the toughest of critics – in this case, Rathbun.

The chef was involved throughout the process and asked for a 90-day exclusive on the cheese once the restaurant opened. That time period is up, and the cheese became available at retail last week.

Rathbun's goal was to find a locally made cottage cheese rivaling that of California's acclaimed Cowgirl Creamery. The Mozzarella Company didn't make cottage cheese, so he told Lambert that if she could create a rich, large-curd cheese, he'd feature it on his new restaurant's menu.

Rathbun is one discerning customer. He's a chef-ambassador for Wisconsin Cheeses and a member of the artisan cheese promotion team for the National Dairy Association.

And he had a specific texture and flavor profile in mind for the cheese he'd commissioned.

Making the cheese was a team effort: Whitley worked to create the requisite large curds; Lambert suggested the crème fraîche and cream coating; and Rathbun dropped by for taste tests. But mostly, it was Whitley logging the hours to turn a humble cheese into something luxe.

With Rathbun's restaurant debut looming, there was pressure to produce something soon. She missed the first deadline, but Rathbun waited patiently for six weeks.

"It took two or three tries to get the curds the right size," says Whitley. "It's a time-consuming process." She explains that the curds must be cooked very slowly. "Cook them too fast, and the curds have a squeaky texture. The temperature of the curds can rise only one degree per minute."

When it came to seasoning the cheese, "Kent became very involved," says Lambert. "He stood there and tasted it until it was exactly the way he wanted it. He and Mitchell worked on the proportion of curds to creamy liquid, and the amount of salt. Mitchell was weighing out the salt to the gram."

Finally, Whitley had a winner: large, creamy curds with a slightly chewy texture and just the right level of salt.

So what in heaven's name would drive a chef to turn artisan cottage cheese into a holy grail? For Rathbun, it was the unexpected wow factor from a cheese with a pedestrian image.

"When I tasted Cowgirl Creamery's cottage cheese, I thought, 'people don't appreciate cottage cheese.' It's one of those products that people look down on and don't expect to see in a nice restaurant," he says. "But this was delicious. I thought I could do a lot with this cheese."

The restaurant uses as much as 15 pounds a week. It's in a green goddess dressing for the restaurant's signature wedge salad, and it turns up in some "light plate" specials.

It might be lighter than other artisan cheeses, but it's not low-fat. As Whitley says: "This is not the dieter's cottage cheese."

"You wouldn't sit there and eat half a cup of it – it's very rich," Lambert says.

She likes to put teaspoons of it on slices of fresh tomatoes. Whitley serves it with fresh fruit, sprinkled with salt and pepper.

But Rathbun uses the cheese liberally.

"I think this cheese should be the star of the show," he says. "I'd put [it] in a cool mold so that it sits up on the plate, put tomatoes around it, drizzle it with olive oil and add a squeeze of lemon or a little lemon zest."

That's not your momma's diet plate, but it's far more enjoyable.

Rathbun likes the tangy hint of lemon that the crème fraîche imparts. He recommends substituting the cheese for ricotta, mozzarella or goat cheese in white pizza, stuffed pasta and grilled vegetable lasagna.

At about \$5 for an 8-ounce tub, it's pricier than the typical cottage cheese. But Rathbun rationalizes the cost: "Go out and price a good goat cheese," he says.

And speaking of goat cheese, he says he'd like to see Mozzarella Company make a goat milk cottage cheese.

Whitley wouldn't shrink from that challenge. "Maybe we would – we're always up for trying new things."

*Tina Danze is a Dallas freelance writer.*

## GET SOME

The Mozzarella Company's cottage cheese is sold in 8-ounce tubs for about \$5. It's available at Dallas Central Market or at the Mozzarella Company (2944 Elm St., 214-741-4072). HOW TO USE IT

**A spread or dip:** Combine 1 cup cottage cheese with salt, pepper and minced herbs (such as parsley, chives and basil or dill) to taste. Chill and serve as an appetizer with whole grain bread, crackers or carrots sliced on the diagonal (to maximize their length).

**Serve with fresh fruit**, such as ripe figs, pear or watermelon. If you like a salty counterpoint to the sweet fruit, sprinkle a little sea salt on top of the cheese.

**Make a breakfast** or snack-time crostini: Top toasted country breads with cottage cheese; drizzle with honey and sprinkle with chopped toasted walnuts or almonds.

**Enrich your favorite** ranch dressing by stirring in some cottage cheese.

**Toss with pasta**, grated lemon zest, chopped walnuts and minced parsley.

**Substitute cottage cheese** for mozzarella in a sliced-tomato salad. Sprinkle the slices with salt and pepper. Top each slice with a heaping teaspoon of cottage cheese and a drizzle of olive oil. Add a chiffonade of basil and-or grated lemon zest if desired.

**Top flatbread** or pizza with cottage cheese, tomatoes or grilled vegetables, and herbs. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with sea salt.