



CHEESY DOES IT

BY NINA ELDER RECIPES BY PAULA LAMBERT PHOTOS BY COLLEEN DUFFLEY

Fresh mozzarella is rich, creamy — and so easy a 5 year-old can make it. Don't believe us? Cheese whiz Paula Lambert shows you (and the kiddos) how it's done.



When you really think about it, the kitchen is like one big playground: you can make a mess, play around with ingredients and techniques, and get as creative as you want. So it's no wonder that kids are drawn to this magical place. Helping to sustain and cultivate that sense of culinary wonder leads to enthusiastic eaters, curious cooks—and maybe even a MasterChef or two.

The key is to start early. “Kids are made for the kitchen,” says Tracy Kontos, MasterChef Season 2 contestant from Coral Springs, Florida. “They love to be given a job and they love to create.” The hands-on process of making fresh mozzarella (pulling, stretching, folding) is like an edible arts-and-crafts project, making it the perfect project for all the little cooks in your kitchen. And the kids are involved



This page, clockwise from top left: Spicy jalapeno peppers add a kick to an "adult" mozzarella roll. Eva Vogt stirs her way to delicious cheese, while Kai Hong waits patiently for his turn; Stoney Barton drains the water from the cheese curd just before it's ready to stretch. Opposite page: Paula Lambert teaches Anna Kate Bertollet about the magic of mozzarella.

from start to finish, so when the mozzarella is done it truly is their creation.

To get the technique just right, we went to the mozzarella master herself, Paula Lambert, who founded the Mozzarella Company in Dallas in 1982. Paula was making fresh mozzarella before most people in the U.S. had even heard of the stuff. She's taught countless mozzarella-making classes around the country—and around the world. And whenever she's teaching at studio b the beach (studiobthebeach.com) in Alys Beach, Florida—where we caught up with her—there is a kids-only class designed just for mini chefs. She leads the pint-size cooks through the draining and stirring and stretching and folding and shaping—and watches their eyes widen as a ball of fresh mozzarella slowly takes shape.

"The classes are fun because the kids aren't afraid to try," says Paula. Their fearlessness is rewarded by creamy, gooey fresh cheese that they can toss with pasta or a salad or lay slices on top of that ultimate kid-friendly food, pizza.

Crafty kids can skip the spheres and opt to make mozzarella rolls, where the warm cheese is spread out on the counter (use your hands!) until it's about ¼-thick. Top the cheesy canvas with your favorite filling (Paula likes chopped Kalamata olives, finely chopped jalapeno peppers, or thin slices of prosciutto and whole fresh basil leaves), then roll it on up. Wrap the roll in plastic wrap, place it in a bowl of ice until the cheese cools, then unwrap and slice the roll crosswise into pieces to reveal the swirls of filling inside.



KIDS ARE MADE FOR THE KITCHEN. THEY LOVE TO BE GIVEN A JOB AND THEY LOVE TO CREATE.

—Tracy Kontos, *MasterChef* Season 2 contestant.



Hey Paula!

It all started with a tomato and mozzarella salad at a little outdoor café on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. Just one

Paula Lambert
Mozzarella maven
and owner of
Mozzarella Co.

bite, and Paula Lambert found her calling: to bring fresh mozzarella to America. The catch? It was 1981. And she lived in Dallas.

But that didn't stop her. The spunky Southerner called on her Italian connections (she'd lived there for five years before moving back to the states), apprenticed at an Italian cheese factory, and then brought an Italian cheese professor to Dallas to help her get the business up and running. In 1982, Paula and her team made about 100 pounds of cheese a week. Today, her Dallas-based Mozzarella Company turns out 3,000 pounds a week.

Thirty years ago, when the only mozzarella in America came in shrink-wrapped blocks, Paula was at the leading edge of the country's artisanal cheese revolution. She had to convince people to sample the weird white orbs packed in water. "People had never heard of fresh mozzarella, but once they tasted it they loved it," she says. Today, plastic packages of mozzarella are a common sight in many grocery stores, which couldn't make Paula happier. "Who would have thought that cheese would have made it this far?" she says.

To buy Paula's cookbooks, to find out where she's teaching next, or to order some of her delicious cheeses, check out the Mozzarella Company's website at mozzco.com.

To help the cheese curd come together in hot water, Rain Hong gives it all a stir, below.



Ready to get started? We've got step-by-step photos and detailed directions that will take you and the kiddos in the process of transforming a hunk of cheese curd into beautifully shaped fresh mozzarella, just like you'd see in the store. Oh. And before you get cooking, keep in mind the real reason you're in the kitchen. "Let them get messy," says Season 2 contestant Alvin Schultz from Houston, Texas. "Don't worry about them doing things perfectly. As long as they're participating, you'll be building memories and creating a passion for food."

MASTERING MOZZARELLA

Go from curd to way-amazing cheese in seven simple steps.

1 Start at the Store Paula makes her own mozzarella curd, but it's tough to make curd at home because it's nearly impossible to get the pH levels just right. If the pH isn't at the right level, the mozzarella won't stretch. You can buy mozzarella curd at an Italian market or online from the Mozzarella Company, mozzco.com.



2 Cut Above To maximize the stretchiness of the cheese, slice the curd very thinly. "Imagine that you're slicing brisket," says Paula.

3 Water World Arrange the slices of cheese curd in a bowl and cover with one to two inches of hot (180°F to 200°F) water. This will help soften the cheese, but won't melt it completely. If the cheese starts to melt, add a bit of room-temperature water.

4 Causing a Stir Stir the curd in the bowl, lifting the curd up with a spoon to see if it's stretching. When it looks soft and stringy, pour off most of the water and stir the mixture until it comes together.



5 Time to Stretch Remove the mozzarella from the bowl and stretch it between your hands. Fold the mozzarella rope back on itself and pull again. Repeat this step three or four times, then gather the mozzarella into a loose ball.

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—Alvin Schultz, *MasterChef* Season 2 contestant.



6 Shape Up Make a C shape with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. Place the mozzarella in the other hand. Gently push the cheese through the C shape, creating a smooth, shiny surface on the top of the mozzarella. Twist off the bottom of the mozzarella, forming a ball (make it as small or as large as you like).

7 Chill Out Place the cheese in a bowl of cool (40°F to 50°F) water to firm up.



SPAGHETTI WITH SHRIMP, SCALLOPS, AND FRESH MOZZARELLA

MAKES 8 SERVINGS.

- ¼ cup olive oil
- ½ pound raw peeled and deveined shrimp
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ pound bay scallops
- 1 4-ounce jar sliced pimiento, drained
- ¼ cup chopped pitted kalamata olives
- 3 tablespoons capers
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 4 quarts water
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 16 ounces spaghetti
- 1½ cups (½ pound) fresh mozzarella cut into ½-inch cubes
- ¼ cup large fresh basil leaves, cut into a chiffonade
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves

1. In a large skillet heat oil over medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, add the shrimp and cook for 1 to 2 minutes, turning as necessary. When the shrimp begin to turn a faint pink on one side, add the garlic, turn the shrimp over, and cook for 1 to 2 minutes. Add the scallops and cook for 1 to 2 minutes longer, turning as necessary. Remove from the heat and stir in the pimiento, olives, capers, the 1 teaspoon salt, lemon juice, and pepper. Set aside.

2. Pour hot water into a large serving dish to heat it. Once heated, discard the water and dry the dish with a towel.

3. In a large heavy stockpot bring the 4 quarts water to a rolling boil; add the 1 tablespoon salt. Add the spaghetti, stirring to prevent the spaghetti from sticking together. Cook according to the package directions (about 7 minutes) or until spaghetti is al dente. Remove from the heat and pour the spaghetti and water into a colander that has been placed in the sink.

4. Once drained, shake the colander and then pour the spaghetti into the skillet containing the seafood; toss to combine. Cook over low heat until the spaghetti absorbs all of the liquid in the skillet. Remove from the heat. Add the fresh mozzarella and basil, and toss briefly, only to distribute the ingredients. The heat of the pasta will melt the cheese as it is distributed throughout the mixture.

5. To serve, transfer spaghetti mixture to the heated serving dish and sprinkle with thyme leaves. Serve immediately.





Paula gives Anna Kate Bertollet a hand with her cheesy masterpiece, left.



WATERMELON AND YELLOW TOMATO SALAD

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

- 2½ to 3 cups watermelon cut into about 1-inch cubes
- 1¼ to 1½ cups ripe yellow tomatoes cut into about ½-inch cubes
- ¾ cup (¼ pound) fresh mozzarella cut into ½-inch cubes
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 large fresh basil leaves, cut into a chiffonade, divided
- 6 large fresh mint leaves, cut into a chiffonade, divided
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1. In a large salad bowl toss together the watermelon, tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, olive oil, half of the basil leaves, half of the mint leaves, the salt, and pepper.

2. Top with the remaining basil and mint leaves.

GET KIDS INVOLVED. IF THEY HELP YOU COOK SOMETHING, THEY'LL EAT IT.

—Jennifer Behm, *MasterChef* Season 2 contestant.