

Paula Lambert

BS '66, Founder, The Mozzarella Company

PAULA LAMBERT TOOK THE ROUNDABOUT way to becoming an entrepreneur — one many try but few succeed at. She wasn't struck with a brilliant idea one day. Instead, she decided that after years of volunteering and managing the books for her husband's business, she wanted her own. But what should it be?

She loved food and she loved Italy, so Lambert thought about ways she could combine her two passions to create something that Dallas lacked. Plus, she says, "My goal was to have a business so that I could go to Italy on business trips."

Pasta immediately jumped to mind. But before delving in, Lambert did her research and found that two pasta factories were about to open in Dallas. She felt crushed. For Christmas that year, 1981, she and her husband traveled to Italy (where Lambert had lived before marrying) to visit friends. "The first thing we ate there was fresh mozzarella. It was perfect," she remembers. And the light bulb came on.

Forming the Mold

After graduating from UT with an elementary education degree, Lambert spent two years as a first-grade teacher. During summers, she traveled Europe. Eventually, the allure consumed her; she quit her teaching job and spent five years living in Italy, mastering the language and working odd jobs.

Lambert extended her holiday once the mozzarella bug bit. She convinced the chef at a nearby cheese factory to let her observe their cheese-making process. Lambert's enthusiasm and charm also got her in with the director of an Italian cheese school, who arranged for one of his professors to travel to Dallas and help Lambert get her cheese balls rolling.

The Aging Process

In 1982, fresh mozzarella was a bit ahead of its time in Dallas. The trend toward fresh and specialty foods hadn't hit America yet, and Lambert had little success selling her cheese. But determination, a little luck, and burgeoning relationships kept her going.

Realizing the rest of Dallas didn't know yet it would love fresh mozzarella as much as she did, Lambert shifted her focus from gourmet shops to restaurants. Some young chefs took notice, began cooking with her mozzarella, and told their friends. Over the years, Lambert has gained business across the country through word of mouth. Many of those young chefs now are top chefs at hotels, restaurants, and chains — and they're still fans of the Mozzarella Company cheeses.

After 27 years, Lambert and the Mozzarella Company have grown from making 40 pounds of mozzarella per day to 1,000 pounds. And many business trips to Italy later, they no longer stick to mozzarella and ricotta; Lambert and her cheesemakers produce 27 different cheeses, all with a staff of 18 out of her original small factory and store in Dallas' Deep Ellum neighborhood.

LAMBERT'S BEST BUSINESS TIP:

Be persistent and positive, and have a good time. "Owning a business is always harder and takes more time than you anticipate," Lambert says. "But if you love what you do, it's not really work."

More than three-quarters of their business is with restaurants and grocers, now including Whole Foods and Central Market, but in the last 10 years, Lambert has found new ways to reach the citizen lovers of cheese like herself.

Say Cheese

The author of two nationally distributed cookbooks (*The Cheese Lover's Cookbook and Guide* and *Cheese, Glorious Cheese*), Lambert is putting her education degree to good use. She admits to over-indulging in the writing process, including not only recipes but the history of cheese, nutritional information, and tips on buying, preparing, and cooking with cheese. Spinning off of the success, the company began offering cheese-and-wine- and cheese-and-beer-pairings classes at the factory. Then Lambert says, "I decided, some people might like to learn how to make the cheeses." Lambert even offers the class of a lifetime — each summer and fall, she gives an intimate group cooking lessons in southwest France.

As tastes and trends in food have evolved, Paula Lambert has kept pace, always ready to try something new even if sometimes inadvertently. When Lambert began making a taleggio cheese, it didn't sell quickly, and a blue mold developed on the exterior. She was pleasantly surprised at its tasty improvement. Virgin Airlines purchased a large order soon after. Lambert asked if they knew it had blue mold, and they said yes, that's why they liked it. The popular Deep Ellum Blue Cheese was born.

Some now consider the Mozzarella Company a Dallas institution, but to Paula Lambert she's still working to make it. "We have a wonderful reputation," she says, but stresses the need of all businesses to focus on quality. "You're only as good," she says, "as your cheese."
—Rebecca Fontenot

