

BelGioioso Targets Evolving Market With Products From Fresh Mozz To Premium Parm

By Ray Mueller

Denmark, WI—Consumer demand for convenience, quick preparation, freshness, and easy digestibility can be met without sacrificing the flavor, eye appeal, texture and other traits that those consumers also appreciate, says BelGioioso Cheese president Errico Auricchio, whose company won first place among the 50 entries for its fresh Mozzarella in the biennial United States Championship Cheese Contest earlier this year.

“The key is to make cheese taste good – or forget it,” Auricchio stresses. “We don’t go after the novelty but we want to make the novelty good.”

What has Auricchio excited about the cheese market today is that “people are trying new things and flavors. It’s an evolving target. Fresh Mozzarella was an unknown in Wisconsin 10 years ago.”

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Depending on the part of the country, Auricchio finds a great difference among consumers’ cheese preferences. For example, the taste preferences are quite different between New York City and Wisconsin but what thrills him is the frequency of graduation from BelGioioso’s Gorgonzola to other varieties with more distinctive and specialized tastes, even in Wisconsin where Cheddar, Colby, and processed cheese have dominated historically.

Today, BelGioioso makes fresh Mozzarella that is packaged as three and eight-ounce Perline (shelf life of 37 days), as 16 slices in a one-pound package, in an eight-ounce package, as one and two-pound loaves, as seven and eight-ounce retail cups, and as 10 and 20-pound curd.

As Auricchio suggests, fresh Mozzarella pairs best with a sprinkling of extra virgin olive oil and freshly ground black pepper along with tomatoes and basil. Served best at room temperature, other suitable accompaniments include oregano, garlic, crusty bread, cold or hot pasta, vegetable dishes, roasted red peppers, prosciutto (dry-cured ham), sardines, and olives.

BelGioioso’s winning fresh Mozzarella entry was taken right off the regular production line and entered under the name of licensed cheese

maker Don Lensmire, who has been with the company for 10 years after previously working at a then-nearby Stella Foods plant.

Lensmire’s brother Terry, a Wisconsin Master Cheese Maker at the Trega Foods plant at Stangelville (formerly Krohn’s Dairy) in neighboring Kewaunee county, won first place for Provolone and part skim Mozzarella in this year’s contest.

Don Lensmire suggests cleanliness is perhaps the one item which separates a championship entry from its competitors. He notes that the other essentials are starting with high quality fresh whole milk and making a cheese with appropriate smooth flavor, creaminess in appearance after being sliced, and a shiny skin with no breaks.

BelGioioso makes whole milk Mozzarella, which has more flavor, a higher fat content, and a softer texture than part-skim Mozzarella. Whole milk Mozzarella can have an oily appearance when melted and it flows easily and browns slowly.

Part-skim, meanwhile, is the top choice for shredding, slicing, and as pizza cheese. It is more chewy and pliable than other Mozzarella products but it browns quickly.

For its overall product line of 15 Italian type cheeses, Auricchio says “the market is growing tremendously at the foodservice and retail level. Consumers want what is light, fresh, healthy, and digestible – something that’s not too rich.”

“The recipes are simple too for chefs and consumers,” Auricchio points out. “They want meals that do not need to be cooked. They want a healthy meal that’s prepared in five minutes.”

Auricchio also cites convenience and eye appeal of the fresh Mozzarella, especially with its Ciliegine (Italian for cherry) and Perline flavors as salad toppings. He suggests walnuts and vinegar as other accompanying ingredients.

Available in many styles, shapes, and sizes, BelGioioso’s line of classic Italian cheese flavors also includes Provolone, American Grana, Asiago, Auribella, Crescenza-Stracchino, Fontina, Gorgonzola, Kasserli, Italico, Mascarpone, Parmesan, Pepato, Peperoncino, Ricotta con Latte, and Romano.

Provolone is aged from 60 days to 12 months, American Grana (a premium Parmesan) for a minimum of 18 months, Asiago for five to 12 months, Auribella for six months, Fontina for 60 days, Gorgonzola for 90 days, Kasserli for at least four months, Parmesan for a minimum of 10 months, and Romano, Pepato, and Peperoncino for at least five months.

The same aging standards that are observed in Italy are maintained at BelGioioso, according to marketing



Errico Auricchio, president of BelGioioso Cheese and cheese maker Don Lensmire of BelGioioso, proudly hold some of the products made at the company six cheese plants in Wisconsin

manager Jamie Wichlacz. “We’re not going to rush the process.”

“We’re not going to change that. We’re following the tradition,” Lensmire agrees.

For the soft and relatively short shelf life cheeses, shipments are made within one week of receiving the order. The latest product innovations are the Crescenza (a soft, creamy, short shelf life mild flavored variety packaged in 3.5-pound wheels), the pre-sliced Mozzarella logs, and a new product called Burrata that is a Mozzarella ball filled with cream.

In its lineup of 15 basic cheese varieties, BelGioioso’s marketing appeals include “a clean, fresh flavor for all of them,” no use of preservatives, and no stabilizer in the Ricotta, Auricchio points out. With the slicing, piece sizes, and packaging, the retail product is something that “consumers want to welcome to their refrigerator,” he adds.

BelGioioso’s cheeses go nationwide through more than 100 distributors and are sold by retailers such as Wal-Mart, Sam’s Club, Piggly Wiggly, Pick ‘n Save, Sentry, Festival Foods, Copps, Grasc Foods, Rozzi’s Deli, Blossoms, and many specialty stores, Wichlacz notes.

That roster of retailers illustrates the company’s growth since Auricchio and other members of his family came from Italy in 1979 to start their business at a plant in Wrightstown in southwest Brown County.

Since then, BelGioioso has blossomed into two new adjacent but separate facilities west of Denmark (referred to as the Denmark and Glenmore plants), the former Steve’s Cheese plant at nearby Lange’s Cor-

ners, and two plants about five miles apart in the Pulaski area that are named Chase (a new facility) and Pulaski (a former Cheddar plant).

Each site is dedicated to particular kinds of production. Gorgonzola is made at Lange’s Corners, the Mozzarella and other soft varieties at the Glenmore plant that opened about three years ago, the hard cheeses such as Parmesan, Romano, and Asiago plus Fontina at Chase near Pulaski, and the American Grana, fresh curds, and stretch Mozzarella at the older Pulaski plant while the packaging and shipping departments and the offices are in the original plant a few miles west of Denmark.

The milk for making those award-winning cheeses is supplied today by BelGioioso’s 216 dairy farmer patrons. Auricchio recalls that he had about 20 shippers in 1979 and points out that milk production per farm has more than tripled on average since then.

BelGioioso has won numerous first, second, and third place awards in prestigious cheese contests, starting with a best of class for Provolone in 1982 and a first place for Parmesan in 1986 in the world championship natural cheese contest.

Also including the US Championship Contest, the American Cheese Society, and the Wisconsin State Fair, the company has won five first places and one third for Provolone, six firsts and one third for Parmesan, three firsts, two seconds, and a third for fresh Mozzarella, three firsts for Tiramisu Mascarpone, and one or two top three places for American Grana, Asiago, Gorgonzola, Italico, Fontina, Auribella, Pepato, Romano, and Vegetarian Parmesan from 1990 through 2006. •