

MOZZARELLA

MAKES A SCANT LB

ACTIVE TIME: 25 MIN START TO FINISH: 6 HR

If you live near a deeply rooted Italian community, chances are you have easy access to great fresh mozzarella. If that's not the case, though, it's time to channel your inner artisanal cheesemaker. You'll find that the pure, clean flavor of homemade mozzarella is a revelation, as is the cheese's tender, almost flaky, pull-apart texture. Time, patience, and careful attention to detail are the keys to success.

- 1 gallon whole milk
- $\frac{1}{8}$ tsp citric acid (source on page 97)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tablet rennet (source on page 97), crushed
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup warm water

EQUIPMENT: cheesecloth; kitchen string

- Heat milk and citric acid to 88°F in a 7- to 8-qt heavy pot over low heat, stirring occasionally, then maintain a temperature of 88 to 91°F on an instant-read thermometer, returning to and removing from heat as necessary, for 1 hour. (Mixture will begin to curdle.)
- Dissolve rennet in warm water, then stir into milk mixture. Let stand, uncovered, maintaining 88 to 91°F, until the consistency of soft pudding, 15 to 20 minutes.
- Using a long knife, make cuts across stiffened milk mixture at $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch intervals, reaching down to bottom of pot, then make similar cuts in stiffened milk mixture to form a crosshatch pattern (small squares) on top. Let stand, undisturbed, 5 minutes. Keeping temperature between 88 and 91°F (reheat when necessary over very low heat), gently stir curds every 10 minutes for 30 minutes, then let curds stand, uncovered and undisturbed, maintaining temperature, 30 minutes more.
- Line a large sieve with cheesecloth and set over a bowl. Using a ladle or slotted spoon, transfer curds to center of cheesecloth. Gather sides up over curds to form a sack and tie sides together with a long piece of string as close to curds as possible but without squeezing curds. Suspend sack from a knob or cupboard handle, using string, at least 4 inches from bottom of bowl (sack should not sit in

any whey that accumulates; if necessary, discard whey as it accumulates). Let hang 3 hours at room temperature.

► Heat a large pot of heavily salted water ($\frac{1}{3}$ cup salt for 5 qt water) to 170°F. Place one fourth of the curds in a shallow bowl, then ladle about 6 cups hot water over curds and let stand until curds start to meld together, about 2 minutes. Gather curds together with a slotted spoon and remove from water. Working over the bowl of hot water, gently fold the mass of curds over itself in your hands, stretching as you fold. Reheat in hot water as necessary (3 to 5 times) to maintain temperature, folding and stretching until curds become a smooth and elastic disk.

► Form into a ball by tucking outside into center, then pinch edges together. Place mozzarella in cool water to cool completely before eating. Make remaining cheese in same manner, reusing hot salted water for subsequent batches.

COOKS' NOTES: Curds can be made and drained in cheesecloth (3 hours) 1 day ahead, then chilled in a sealable bag.

• Mozzarella is best the day it is made but can be kept, covered with water, in refrigerator up to 5 days. Bring to room temperature before serving. 🍴

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BREAD CRUMBS

Forget buying stale bread crumbs off the grocery-store shelf. Fresh bread crumbs made from slightly stale bread are tastier. They are also easy to make.

► Cube day-old bread, crusts and all, into large croutons. If the bread is still soft and moist, place the croutons on a baking sheet and leave them on your counter for a day or so to dry out. Then pulse the bread in a food processor until finely ground. Store in the freezer in an airtight container until needed.

► To toast bread crumbs, preheat the oven to 275°F. Distribute the bread crumbs on a rimmed baking sheet in a single layer (it is fine if they were just pulled out of the freezer) and toast slowly, rotating the pan front to back often, for 20 to 30 minutes, until uniformly golden. Store in a tightly sealed container at room temperature for up to 1 week. 🍴