



Betting
on
Bufala





**At a northern Italian
dairy, two brothers make
a triumphant transition**

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Photography by Dave Yoder & Simone De Marchi



Petting water buffalo on the snout wasn't on my list of a thousand things to do before I die, but now that I've done it, I'm inclined to boast. Despite their pointed horns and enormous girth, water buffalo—*bufala* in Italian—are docile by nature and not skittish if you approach them slowly. When they bellow, though, it sounds as if the Metropolitan Opera is rehearsing its bass section.





Above: Buffalo mingle in the courtyard of the creamery.

Below, left–right: baby buffalo snack on grass; slabs of curd are layered in square molds; water buffalo typically live longer than dairy cows and are more disease resistant.



I learned all this last fall at Quattro Portoni, a small, family-run Italian dairy near Bergamo that makes a range of cheeses from water buffalo milk. For any aficionado of Italian cheese, that description raises at least three questions: What are water buffalo doing in northern Italy, far from the mozzarella producers of Campania, in Italy's south? Can you really make tasty cheeses from water buffalo milk, other than the esteemed *mozzarella di bufala* and *burrata*? And if you can, why don't more cheesemakers do so?

Moving beyond Milk

For answers I went to meet Alfio and Bruno Gritti, brothers who launched Quattro Portoni in the wake of a family tragedy. The aristocratic Gritti family that built Venice's Gritti Palace is, alas, no relation—Alfio and Bruno come from a long line of farmers, rural people who have worked the land around Cologno al Serio, just south of Bergamo, for centuries.

Their father, Renato, sold mostly farm equipment and farmland, but he was always on the lookout for deals. (Once he bought a load of white raincoats at a close-out price, and before long everyone in the village was sporting one.) In 1968 he bought the property where Quattro Portoni now stands, hoping to grow grain and raise beef cattle. But only a few days after the purchase, Renato died in a work accident, leaving his widow, Annamaria, with four boys under the age of 13.

With the help of her brother, Annamaria kept to the plan. The family built a barn and purchased the beef cattle, later transitioning to dairy cattle. Alfio, the second son, went to veterinary school, and Bruno, the third, eventually went to work on the farm. When the two brothers were 20 and 18, they bought the business from their mother.

For 20 years they sold fluid milk, until the price dropped so low that it made no sense to continue. Transforming the milk into cheese would put them



Alfio and Bruno Gritti with their cheeses



Newborns weigh about 90 pounds.



Left: Transferring fresh curds from the vat to the draining table

in direct competition with Arrigoni and Mauri, the region's dominant dairies. But water buffalo? That could be interesting.

The brothers knew a Lombardy farmer who was raising *bufale*—that's the plural—and selling the milk for mozzarella. In 2000 they bought their first 40 water buffalo from him. An instructor at the local dairy school, who had never worked with water buffalo milk, began helping the brothers develop recipes, and by 2005 they were ready to sell the rest of the cows and build a creamery devoted to water buffalo cheese. "We had many doubts," admits Bruno now. "But one thing was clear: cows were a losing business."

Low Yield, High Quality

Today they have a thousand head of water buffalo, sturdy creatures introduced to Italy from Asia centuries ago as draft animals. They are harder than dairy cows because their hooves are tough, so they rarely get hoof infections. Consequently, they live longer and



Above: In the milking barn at Quattro Portoni; right: water buffalo have a docile nature.



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produce more offspring, offsetting their high cost. On the livestock market a water buffalo commands twice the price of a dairy cow.

Bufale are relatively stingy milk producers, but they compensate in quality. In composition their rich milk is closer to sheep's than to cow's milk, ranging from 8.5



Some of the 15 farmstead products made at Quattro Portoni include fresh and flavored cheeses.



Layering cut curd in molds to make Blu di Bufala



Family meal with family cheeses



Water buffalo command twice the price of dairy cows.

to 10 percent fat and about 5 percent protein. It tastes dense, sweet, and velvety, as creamy as half-and-half. One Pakistani family that lives near Quattro Portoni buys the milk for its homemade yogurt.

During my visit to the farm, I watched a *bufala* give birth, silently and stoically, standing until the final moments. The newborn, damp and slick, was black as coal and weighed 80 to 90 pounds, Alfio guessed. He and Bruno raise the males until they are large enough to sell for their meat, which resembles lean beef. Bruno's wife, Elena, made pasta for lunch one day with a delicious *sugo*, or sauce, from ground buffalo meat.

The mother's milk production peaks in the weeks after giving birth, at about six to seven liters per milking. By the end of her ten-month pregnancy, her output drops by half. Although buffalo milk fetches a high price in summer, when mozzarella sales soar, demand tanks in winter. "You have to make cheese or you won't survive," says Bruno.

Rousing Response

In early 2006 Quattro Portoni made its first cheeses (Elena knows the date by heart). The brothers' experiment was barreling forward, providing plenty to worry about. No suppliers had cultures or rennet specifically for water buffalo cheeses. No one knew how much



Blu di Bufala



Quadrello

Bufala Beauties from Northern Italy

Exports account for about half of Quattro Portoni's production, and the United States is its biggest customer. The following notes describe some of the creamery's cheeses available in the United States.

Blu di Bufala

A thick, square cheese weighing roughly nine pounds and matured for about 75 days. The fresh curd drains overnight before being cut into thick slabs and arranged loosely in the molds by hand. The young cheeses are pierced by hand after 10 days, then again a week later, to create the channels for the *Penicillium roqueforti* to grow. Under the natural rind is an open-textured, creamy paste with light veining; yeasty, lactic aromas; and a sweet, mellow flavor.

Casatica

The dairy's most popular cheese, fashioned in a two-pound ingot shape and released at 20 to 28 days. A soft-ripened cheese with a moist, supple, open texture; aromas of yeast and mushrooms; and a tart finish.

Granbù

Quattro Portoni's only raw-milk cheese, Granbù weighs about 20 pounds and is matured for 12 months. The curd is cut small and heated to 50°C (122°F) before hooping. Wheels are lightly pressed and brined for five days. A mature wheel has the firm and creamy yet crumbly texture of a young Parmigiano-Reggiano, with warm butter and animal aromas and a pleasing sweetness.

Quadrello

A washed-rind square weighing roughly five pounds and similar in appearance to Taleggio or Quattro Portoni's Quattro Portoni. The curd is cut large, stirred gently, and drained briefly before molding. Aged 35 to 40 days and washed with brine every five to six days, it's thick and pudgy, with a semisoft ivory paste and scents of cave, mushroom, and cultured milk.

Penicillium roqueforti to use for the dairy's unique blue-veined wheel. And no one had a clue whether aged bufalo cheeses would find an audience. As Bruno bluntly put it, "Is anyone going to eat this?"

The launch party provided the answer. Instead of the anticipated crowd of five hundred locals, five thousand people showed up, including a camera crew from national television. At the brothers' first trade fair the following year, 60 distributors wanted the line. Even the famed affinage and distribution company Guffanti approached them, offering to take all the company's production and market it under the Guffanti brand.

Today Quattro Portoni makes about 15 different farmstead cheeses, several of them patterned after traditional Lombardy styles (see sidebar). The dairy produces mozzarella, of course, but only because consumers expect it. As in Campania, it is a cash-flow product, made one day and sold the next. For most cheesemakers that's reason enough to stick with it. But the Gritti brothers find no challenge there. "The bufale give us an opportunity to make something different," says Bruno. "We should have started ten years earlier." ■

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