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# COOK'S ILLUSTRATED

## Tasting Fresh Mozzarella

What makes the best fresh mozzarella? It's all about balance.

BY LAUREN SAVOIE

Mozzarella comes in many forms, including string cheese, dense blocks for shredding, and larger balls of “fresh” high-moisture mozzarella. You can also make it at home with a few specialty ingredients in less than an hour. According to the traditional method, milk, rennet, and an acid are heated until the curds separate from the whey. The curds are strained, salted, and plunged into hot water to make them flexible. Once removed from the water, they are stretched until they become smooth and elastic. Finally, the cheese is shaped into a block or a ball and cooled, and then it's ready to eat.

### What Exactly Is “Fresh” Mozzarella?

For centuries, fresh mozzarella has been made in Italy using buffalo's milk. But since buffalo mozzarella is not aged and is usually produced with unpasteurized milk, its shelf life is only four to five days, making the cheese difficult to export to the United States.

While there are a few buffalo mozzarella producers in the United States, most domestic “fresh” mozzarella is made from pasteurized cow's milk. The term “fresh mozzarella” is not recognized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, but cheesemakers use it to denote a style of mozzarella that is higher in moisture and is eaten raw (“fresh”) rather than cooked (with a few exceptions, such as pizza margherita).

### Tracking pH and Sodium Levels

We found that cheeses with moderate amounts of sodium were full-flavored and savory. We also noticed a correlation between pH and flavor: Those cheeses that fell in the middle of our lineup's pH range were subtly tangy and slightly sweet. Tasters noted that our favorite cheese, with a pH of 6.0 and 85 milligrams of sodium per serving, had “balanced tang” and was “well seasoned.”



We tasted the cheeses in three different applications, including our Cherry Tomato Caprese Salad.

With this in mind, we set out to find our favorite fresh mozzarella, focusing on cheeses labeled “fresh” and sold in shrink-wrapped balls or packed in brine. We rounded up eight nationally available products priced from \$0.32 to \$1.00 per ounce and tasted them plain, in our recipe for Cherry Tomato Caprese Salad, and melted onto miniature toasts. We didn't notice much difference in the cheeses when they were melted; however, flavor and texture differences were apparent in the plain and Caprese salad tastings.

Sodium played a big part in how we perceived flavor. The cheeses' sodium levels ranged from 50 to 110 milligrams per 1-ounce serving, and tasters found cheeses at the low end of the spectrum bland and boring. Mozzarellas at the higher end of the sodium spectrum fared a bit better, but a few tasters found them overly salty. We preferred products with a moderate amount of sodium (85 to 95 milligrams per serving); they were savory and flavorful without being overwhelmingly salty.

Zeroing in on differences in the tanginess of the cheeses took a bit more digging. During the mozzarella-making process, an acid is added to help the curds stretch. This acid can be vinegar, cheese cultures (which some mozzarella makers use to form and



our that mo into big flavor differences. Tasters found the highest-pH cheeses, which were acidified with lactic or citric acid, too bland and sweet; they found the two lowest-pH cheeses, which were acidified with vinegar or cheese culture, a bit too tart. Our favorite mozzarellas, which had a moderate amount of sodium and were acidified with vinegar or cheese culture, were subtly tangy. These products may have been made using slightly less vinegar or cheese culture than the lower-pH cheeses, though naturally occurring acids influence pH, including naturally occurring acids in the cows' diet, and the original pH of the milk's content of the milk.

### Acid and Moisture Affect Texture

Variations in pH can affect texture. John explained that cheese protein (called casein) is held together by bonds that are broken down by acid. In general, cheeses with a higher pH (less acidic) are firmer. Again, this tracked with our findings: The higher-pH cheeses a bit denser and slightly wetter. The lower-pH cheese was too soft and slightly weepy.

The two top-rated cheeses also had higher moisture content, more than 60 percent. The higher moisture content in a melt-in-your-mouth cream cheese (with about 49 percent moisture) was dense and rich. The higher moisture cheese for grating. However, texture differences were less noticeable when we melted the cheeses. They were perfectly milky, stretchy.

### A Better Mozzarella

Our favorite's cheese...

## Lioni Mozzarella, An All-Around Balanced Cheese...

“An all-around “balanced” cheese, this mozzarella was “tender but not too squishy” and “firm but not too dry.” It had “the perfect amount of salt,” and tasters also picked up on “grassy” notes of “cultured” milk (it uses cheese culture to acidify the curds). Its texture was “springy” and “soft,” and we loved its “luxurious,” “buttery” richness.”

— Lauren Savoie —  
Senior Editor, Tastings & Testings

## RECOMMENDED

### LIONI Fresh Mozzarella

PACKAGE: Shrink-wrapped

INGREDIENTS: Pasteurized whole milk, starter, cheese cultures, vegetable rennet, salt

SODIUM: 95 mg

TYPE OF ACID: Cheese culture

pH: 5.9

MOISTURE: 61.2%

