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The Record

# Eating Out on \$50: A Mano in Ridgewood

E-mail Dining Food

Friday, May 25, 2007

By JEFFREY PAGE  
RESTAURANT REVIEWER

We've been to a million pizza places in our lives, right? We've ordered a slice and a Coke, wolfed it down, slapped a few dollars on the counter and went on our way. It was fast and it was cheap. Done well, it was satisfying, because we love pizza.

But those million slices revealed a certain inevitability. Almost always, lunch was a wedge of crust covered with a thick slather of mozzarella and a rising tide of sauce. And you never knew how long that pie was out of the oven and waiting for someone to ask for a piece.

At the 1,000,001st place, the specialty of the house is pizza in the Neapolitan style. At this restaurant -- A Mano in Ridgewood -- you don't ask for a slice but order a pie for your hungry self. Here, they bake personal pizzas -- about a foot in diameter and cut into six slices.

It's fast at A Mano. The wood-fired brick ovens cook at 1,000 degrees, and pizzas are done in about a minute.

But it's not cheap. To keep within the limit of \$50 for four people, each of us ordered a pie -- and nothing else. What about combining the least-expensive pizza, a cheese-only pie, and least-expensive antipasto (arugula, cherry tomatoes and angioletti, or fried dough strips)? Didn't work. Salad? No, and don't even think about dessert. In fact, after we polished off a bottle of pinot grigio we had brought to this BYOB, we were reduced to ice

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water.

But don't let price put you off. Find A Mano on Chestnut Street, a block from the train station, and either conduct your own \$50 experiment or ignore this artificial limit and just have a good time.

15 varieties of pizza

The menu offers 15 varieties of pizza. Ten are made with fresh mozzarella, but not so much that it tests your gagging reflex. Instead of a thick tomato sauce, A Mano uses finely chopped tomatoes seasoned with a little salt and doesn't even use the word "sauce" on its menu. The tomatoes taste fruity. The Neapolitan crust is soft and chewy, with a good, hearty flavor.

And, in short, this pizza is terrific.

Here's what we ordered.

- Margherita pizza (\$9.99) is the A Mano pie that comes closest to the countless plain New York-style slices that are devoured every day in America. It's the basic crust-cheese-tomato combination, but done with a light hand. There's less cheese and tomato than you might expect, but still, this "plain" pizza was delicious.
- Mast Nicola (\$7.99) is made with pecorino Romano cheese, olive oil and basil. This tomatoless white pizza actually was slightly yellowish and more than slightly wonderful. Be sure to ask for extra napkins if you order it. Between the melted cheese and olive oil, you'll need them.
- Academia (\$14.99) is made of pecorino Toscano cheese, prosciutto, cherry tomatoes and basil. The prosciutto was on the salty side.
- Like several other pies on the menu, Ortolana (\$13.99), which is the Italian word for a greengrocer, was right for vegetarians. It consisted of mozzarella and tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant, artichokes, mushrooms and basil. The Ortolana was baked to the point of allowing the cheese to melt while still letting the vegetables maintain some of their crispness.

Now, if you've been doing the math, you see this came to \$47 without tax or tip, which meant that we couldn't sample any of A Mano's eight antipasti and salads or six desserts.

One thing to bear in mind, however, is that the management has no problem with sharing. In a previous visit, a waitress suggested it. So, for example, two people -- not famished -- might do well with one pie and two salads or two pies and one salad.

The cavernous A Mano is a friendly establishment that celebrates its product. The cherry-red walls are decorated with large photographs of the making of pizza a mano -- by hand. The restaurant's focal point is the two large brick ovens behind a long marble counter where the pies are assembled and baked. All the cooking is done in this open kitchen, and there's room to walk over and take a look.

The service was attentive and courteous, although we were mildly put off by a server's encouraging us to order salads, explaining that the kitchen was so busy it might take 10 minutes for our pizzas to arrive. Ten minutes didn't sound like an unreasonable wait, and we declined the offer. And then, about two minutes later, a waiter arrived with our four pies.

After many happy years snacking and lunching on New York pizza -- with an occasional foray to a slice of Sicilian -- the appearance of A Mano and its Neapolitan pies is a treat.



The Record welcomes feedback about its restaurant reviews for publication in the Go! section. To comment, e-mail [features@northjersey.com](mailto:features@northjersey.com). Please include your name, address and telephone number for verification.

\* \* \*

## A MANO

24 Franklin Ave.

Ridgewood

201-493-2000

### Neapolitan pizzeria

### Bright and casual

### Moderate

- **Prices:** Appetizers \$5.99 to \$11.99; pizza \$7.99 to \$19.99.
- **Recommended dishes:** Margherita pizza, Ortolana pizza.
- **Liquor, wine:** B.Y.O.B.
- **Service:** Attentive.
- **Setting:** Cavernous space with floor-to-ceiling brick ovens.
- **Noise level:** Can get too loud for comfort.
- **Credit cards:** AE, MC, V.
- **Reservations:** 10 or more only.
- **Days closed:** None.
- **Accommodations for children:** "Bambino" pizza, highchairs.
- **Dress:** Casual.
- **Lunch:** Daily.
- **Early bird service:** No.
- **Takeout:** Yes.
- **Parking:** Metered on-street, nearby pay lots.
- **Web site:** [amanopizza.com](http://amanopizza.com).
- **Rated by The Record:** May 25, 2007.

**Cost guide:** A dinner for two without alcohol but including three courses, tax, and a 15 percent tip totaling \$40 or less is inexpensive; \$41 to \$70, moderate; \$71 to \$130, expensive; more than \$130, very expensive.

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