

Pizzeria brings a Naples specialty to North Jersey

Wednesday, March 21, 2007

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▶ Video: [A Mano cooks authentic pizza of Naples](#)
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It took a week for a craftsman from Naples, Italy, to build the brick ovens. Today, it will take a half-hour more to build, light and monitor the fire.

The pizza dough spent all night and all morning rising, and it will still take the pizza maker a minute to knead and stretch your piece into the shape he envisions.

The fresh mozzarella was shaped by an artisan's hands. The Roma tomatoes were crushed by human fingers.

And you thought pizza was fast food.

Actually, it is.

The painstaking preparation of the equipment and ingredients is just the prelude for when the pizzaiolo -- or pizza chef -- steps to the marble counter, dusts it with flour and cues the symphony of tomato, mozzarella and basil. In just one minute, he's firing a Neapolitan pizza from a wooden peel into the red-hot oven. In another minute, it's on your plate.

"Now this," said Jerry Turci, with a slice in his hand, "is authentic."

That's the experience at A Mano, the new Neapolitan pizza restaurant on Chestnut Street and Franklin Avenue in Ridgewood, where Turci -- the owner of Jerry's Gourmet & More (one is adjacent; another is in Englewood) -- his pizzaiolo Roberto Caporuscio and their business partners set out to treat North Jersey to a real and rustic taste of their homeland.

"You open the door and you're in Naples. The atmosphere, the fire, the smell, the taste -- that's Naples," said Caporuscio. "But all of that means nothing if you don't have a good hand making it. It's the hand of the man."

And that man is Caporuscio, who learned the craft at Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana, moved to the United States to start a pair of pizza shops in Pittsburgh, and then traveled the country to teach the proper technique to other shops. Their partnership was forged over a pie at Naples 45, the popular Manhattan pizza joint where Caporuscio has manned the ovens as a guest chef.

His ovens at A Mano -- a mano is Italian for "by hand" -- are the focal point of the restaurant: twin domed ovens with round chimneys that stretch to the ceiling of the two-story dining room. The tiny tiles on the outside are warm to the touch, but the fire inside each one, fueled by apple and cherry woods, can reach its target of 1,000 degrees in about 15 minutes, enough to turn raw dough, tomatoes, cheese and basil into a blistering, bubbling pizza Margherita in one minute. In your neighborhood pizza parlor, it would take more like eight to 10.

"The secret to everything is simplicity," Caporuscio said. "The dough? Water, flour, yeast and salt. And time. This we made yesterday afternoon," he said, gesturing to the lump he was alternately kneading against the marble counter and stretching over his hands. Neapolitan tradition leaves no room for wildly tossing dough into the air.



BETH BALBIERZ / THE RECORD

▶ The Mast' Nicola (pictured) is a pizza at the A Mano pizzeria in Ridgewood.

VIDEO



MARIEL HART /
NORTHJERSEY.COM

▶ [A Mano cooks authentic pizza of Naples](#)
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The evolution of

It also leaves no room for gluttony. A Neapolitan pizza is modest, not much larger than a foot across. There is no sauce, only plum tomatoes with sea salt. Cheese -- the fresh mozzarella is made in-house by Giuseppe Cuomo -- is applied in light sprinkles, not handfuls. Toppings don't topple; even if you order the Funghi (champignon, cremini and shitake mushrooms) or the Capricosa (artichokes, mushrooms and ham), they won't overwhelm the delicate creaminess of the cheese or the freshness of the tomatoes.

"Once you get used to this, you can't go back," Turci said. "For 200 years, big companies have tried to copy this, but they can't. Because the concept behind everything here is authenticity. People want more authenticity," he continued, reiterating a mantra he doesn't tire of repeating. The tables and chairs that can seat 100 are from Italy, he said. So are the painted tiles that line the counters and accent every table. Even the 20-foot-long, E-shaped marble countertop was imported. It took two forklifts to get it in place.

Seven weeks after A Mano's opening, Turci and Caporuscio are still tinkering. They brought in Antonio Starita -- whose family pizzeria in Naples always serves more than 1,000 pies a night -- as a guest chef for 10 days. Calzone was added to the menu last week, and new pizzas are continually being introduced. New flavors, such as fig and sour cherry, also rotate in and out of the gelato bar in front of the store, where the espresso seems to flow freely. When the owners feel they've mastered this model, they'll set their sights on another cuisine-savvy city in the region they think is ready for real Neapolitan pizza.

"Once we get this right, we'll see where else we can introduce it," he said.

Blog: northjersey.com/foodblog

Neapolitan pizza

- In the 16th century, pizza in Naples, Italy, was rustic: Pecorino Romano cheese, extra-virgin olive oil and basil. No tomatoes. "This was the pizza for when nobody had money," said Jerry Turci, co-owner of A Mano in Ridgewood, who calls that pizza the Mast' Nicola and has positioned it at the top of the menu.

- "Two hundred years ago, when they had a little bit of money, they had this," Turci continued, pointing to the Napolitana, with crushed plum tomatoes, basil and a sprinkle of dried oregano. When the pizza is half-cooked, it's drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil and returned to the oven.

- In 1889, the Margherita -- the most popular pizza in the world, Turci said -- was born, created for Queen Margherita of Italy. It included fresh mozzarella cheese. That's on the menu at A Mano, as well as the Regina Margherita, which uses buffalo mozzarella.