

A Neapolitan Pastry Chef in New Jersey

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Bigné, a Neapolitan specialty

Neapolitan pastry chef Sabatino Sirica gave a series of classes at A Mano in Ridgewood, New Jersey

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Last Thursday at Kesté Pizza and Vino, Roberto Caporuscio the pizzaiolo and owner, brought us a slice of La Pastiera, a dessert that is not on the menu. Also known as Pizza Gran or Grain Pie, this classic Neapolitan cake is made with ricotta, wheat berries, and candied fruits.

“Try this,” Roberto said, “It was made by one of Naples’ finest pastry makers.” Roberto is not only the best pizzaiolo in America, but he also knows good pastry. The tender, delicate crust enclosed a light and creamy filling subtly flavored with orange and studded with slightly chewy grains of wheat. It was sweeter and less dense than most versions I have tried. Roberto said that it had been made earlier that day by Sabatino Sirica, owner of Pasticceria Sirica in Naples. Sabatino had come to the States to teach pastry making at A Mano, a restaurant and pizzeria in Ridgewood, in Northern New Jersey where Roberto conducts his professional pizza making classes. In fact, Roberto suggested, would I like to attend a pastry class at A Mano the following day and meet Sabatino? There was no need to ask me twice!

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A Mano, which means by hand, is located in the center town, a short block from the Ridgewood train station. Roberto told me that he had helped design the restaurant, which has not just one, but two enormous wood fired pizza ovens that are lined with volcanic stone. Just about everything, from the floor and wall tiles, to the counters, equipment, tables, and chairs had been imported from Italy. At the entrance, there is a counter where you can buy homemade gelato, pastry, or have an expertly made espresso. The high ceilings made the room seem enormous, but the design and wine red color of the walls give it a warm feeling. It seemed like a piece of Naples in New Jersey.



The class was about to start, but first Roberto introduced me to Sabatino Sirica and his assistant, Raffaele Cristiano. Mr. Sirica has been a pastry maker for over 50 years and appears often on Italian TV. The lesson of the day was pasta bigné, the pastry used to make cream puffs. Sabatino brought water to boiling and added butter. As soon as it melted, he began stirring the mixture and adding Caputo 00 flour, which he said is perfect for pastry. The mixture formed a ball but Sabatino continued to stir it so that the dough would lose some of the liquid and puff up properly when baked. Then he scraped the dough into a slowly turning heavy-duty mixer and began adding eggs.

When the dough was ready it looked smooth and shiny. The chefs demonstrated how to handle a pastry bag and form the dough into puffs or a large ring. While the puffs baked, Sabatino gave suggestions on how to vary the recipe and demonstrated how to make *crema pasticceria*, pastry cream flavored with vanilla and lemon.

During his 4 day visit, Sabatino also demonstrated how to make the *pastiera* that I tasted at Keste; two kinds of *sfogliatelle*--the familiar clamshell shaped *riccia* and the less well known *frolla* made with tender *pasta frolla*, a sweet pie or cookie dough; and *baba al rhum*, small yeast cakes soaked in rum syrup. It was a great opportunity to learn about Neapolitan pastry from a true master.



Classes are held at A Mano every few months. There is plenty to taste and everyone went home with a box of pastry.

A Mano is certified by two organizations that assure the quality and tradition of genuine Neapolitan pizza, the Vera Pizza Napoletana and the Association of Neapolitan Pizzaiuoli, sometimes called the pizza police. The restaurant's standards are exacting and only all natural Caputo flour and San Marzano tomatoes are used. Mozzarella is made fresh daily in the restaurant's kitchen. In addition to its pizza menu, A Mano also has a menu of traditional Neapolitan dishes. For information on upcoming classes, check their website at www.amanopizza.com or call 201-493-2000. A Mano is located at 24 Franklin Avenue and is open daily.