

EATING OUT

OUR RATING SYSTEM

★★★★ Excellent ★★★ Very good ★★ Good ★ Fair

Nothing common about this pizza

A Mano

24 Franklin St., Ridgewood,
(201) 493-2000,
amanopizza.com

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Monday through Thursday;
11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday;
12:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday
★★★

By Teresa Politano
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

To live in Jersey is to think you know pizza. But you don't know pizza until you've been to A Mano.

This is pizza from Naples with a crust so thin and fragrant it's almost a crepe.

It's pizza like you've never had before. Owner Fred Mortati is quite a persuasive crusader. He loves the food philosophy of Naples: the fresh ingredients, the light approach, the authenticity. "I don't consider this an Italian restaurant," he says. "I consider this a trip to Italy."

But in the end it's not his passion that will convince you, it's his pizza.

First, the dough. It's made with uber-pure flour from the finest of wheat. And it uses very little yeast. (Which is more work, and is more time-consuming, but which also translates into much less



PHOTOS BY ROBERT SCHLIMM FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Neapolitan-style pizzas cooked in a 1,000-degree wood-burning oven at A Mano in Ridgewood. Owner Fred Mortati, below, a food importer who developed such a burning crush on pizza from Naples while doing business abroad that he vowed to bring it home, stands in front of his ovens.



bummy-rumbling afterward). The dough is tended carefully. No one spins it or tosses it dramatically into the air; that just ruins everything. (In Naples, to know how to handle pizza dough is a well-regarded skill. Mortati is proud that his restaurant is certified by the Verace Pizza Napoletana and the Association of Neapolitan Pizzaiuoli, groups that keep a watchful eye on the authenticity of these kinds of things.)

Then, the oven. It's a custom-built, wood-fired oven. (Imported, of course, but Mortati also flew in contractors from Naples to put it together.) The temperature is about 1,000 degrees (not a typo), which means your pizza is baked in 80 seconds, give or take.

The end result is a pizza dough that's a whisper of

anything you've had before, more a hologram than an actual sturdy slice. This is pizza clean and light, plus A Mano holds its toppings to higher standards, too (prosciutto di parma, truffle oil, gaeta olives). The restaurant offers more than two dozen pizzas, including a must-have nutella dessert pizza.

Grandma's meatballs (\$8.99), a secret recipe (but with a sauce that uses real tomatoes), were too soft and mushy for my taste, but the others in the group eagerly snapped them up. A Mano salad (\$7.99) was a plateful of fresh greens, plus roasted peppers, tomatoes, luscious artichokes and shaved Parmesan. All those special ingredients, plus no one overdosed on the dressing? This is so not a typical pizzeria.

The artichoke salad (\$11.99)

was equally generous and light, with arugula, roasted artichokes, shaved Parmesan.

Pizzas were outstanding — nuanced, light and crisp. My guess is you can't go wrong with anything you order. We fell for the classic, a Regina Margherita (\$10.99) with homemade buffalo mozzarella, cherry tomatoes, tomato sauce, Parmesan and basil. Thick, bold circles of cured beef topped the arugula and braseola pizza (\$15.99); this beef was surprisingly lean and mild, not salty or leathery. Even the kid's pizza (\$6.99) comes with homemade mozzarella.

As for dessert, Mortati brought in an expert from Naples for that, too. Earlier this year, pastry chef Sabatino Sirica hosted a series of artisan pastry classes at the restaurant and left behind

some of his signature recipes. Sirica's ricotta cake (\$5.99) is to die for; his rustic cheese-filled pastries (\$5.99) are equally stunning. A Mano also specializes in handmade gelato (\$2.99).

Let's face it, a pizzeria is not a destination restaurant. Most of us find the best local pie and stick with it. And if we're being honest, pizza is not gastronomically friendly once you reach a certain age — say around the time you're old enough to pay your own cell phone charges.

But even though A Mano looks like a regular pizza joint — with dusty floors at the end of the night, a children's ghetto in the back room, young and inexperienced waiters who misguidedly extol the virtues of New Jersey wines — it's really a foodie destination. And one worth the drive.