

The Real Deal:

Italian Style

**New Jersey's
A Mano brings
Italian pizza to the
United States**

By Tom Boyles PMQ Editor-in-Chief

Quick Fact: Roberto Caporuscio's restaurant in Ridgewood, NJ is the only place in the U.S. where you can become an APN certified pizza chef.

Food is an amazing thing. What one person considers manna from Heaven another person considers average. Being in the pizza business, we've all heard or read about many of the great pizza makers; Ed LaDou (creator of pizza recipes made famous by Wolfgang Puck, California Pizza Kitchen and his own creations at Caioti in Los Angeles), Chris Bianco (Pizzeria Bianco in Arizona), Domenic DiMarco (Di Fara's in Brooklyn) and many others. But what is it that makes "great" food?

A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to spend about five days in Positano, Italy. It's a picturesque little town of only about 3,000 just an hour south of Naples along the Amalfi Coast. While attending a cooking school there, held in the home of Marco Predieri, one of his chefs made me a traditional local pizza called 'fried pizza'. She handmade the dough, fried it in oil, applied a homemade San Marzano tomato sauce and topped it with fresh homemade mozzarella. It was one of the most wonderful and unique tastes I have ever had and I have often daydreamed of going back some day to eat it again.

On a more recent trip to Ridgewood, New Jersey, I visited Roberto Caporuscio, who opened and owns a pizzeria named A Mano. With him was Antonio Starita, from whom Roberto learned the art of pizza making at Antonio's pizza school in Naples. Everything in A Mano was imported from Italy, right down to the two wood-fired ovens.

While at A Mano, we chatted and I mentioned Positano and the fried pizzas I had there, knowing they would understand what I was talking about since they were from the area. After about an hour, they placed the third of four pizzas I ate that evening in front of me. The aroma of the sauce made me do a double-take. As the first bite of the warm bread and sweet sauce hit my mouth, I forgot I was in Jersey. Combined with the décor, wood-fired smells and taste, my disbelief was suspended for a few minutes and I was back in Positano, Italy, in Marco Predieri's kitchen eating fried pizza.

When I started out thinking about how I would write this article, I told myself that I would try not to wax eloquent about Roberto's pizzas, but in that visit to A Mano I discovered what



Roberto Caporuscio,
founder of New
Jersey's A Mano.



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- Roberto Caporuscio, A Mano Pizza

makes “great” food. It’s not just the ingredients, or finished product. It’s not the plate it’s on or the fork you eat it with, nor is it the music in the background. It’s all of these things combined with time-honored traditions that transport you to a different place when you taste it; in this case, it sent me back to Positano. So much for not waxing eloquent.

In this issue, we’re posing the question, “What is traditional Italian?” What is it that makes great Italian food and what defines food as ‘traditional Italian’? Has pizza forgotten its roots and traditions that started back in Italy? If you want a definition of true, traditional Neapolitan pizza-making, one place where you can find an example is A Mano, which just recently opened on the 25th of January. Roberto sat down with me recently to give his answer of what it takes to create traditional Italian meals.

SELLING ITALIAN

The pizza is what sells at A Mano, but A Mano is selling Italy. Roberto didn’t want to just bring pizza from Naples to America, he wanted to bring Naples itself. . . and he did. Everything in his restaurant was imported from Italy. His silverware, tables and chairs, counters, mixers and even the oven came from Italy. When I say the oven, I am not talking about a self-contained oven either. Roberto actually had bricks shipped from Italy and brought in two Italian oven makers who built the matching wood-fired ovens right in the restaurant.

The restaurant has a very clean design with one focus: the pizza making. The walls are very simple and all eyes are on the counter and ovens. From any table in the restaurant customers can watch the pizza makers hand-stretching and peeling pizzas into the ovens. Inside the ovens, customers can see the flames

WHAT IS THE VPN (VERACE PIZZA NAPOLETANA AMERICAS)?

The VPN (Verace Pizza Napoletana) was founded in the United States in 1996 for the purpose of celebrating and promoting true Neapolitan pizza. The group sets criteria and standards to judge pizza including, crust from hand-formed dough made of Caputo flour, sauce from imported San Marzano tomatoes, fresh slices of buffalo milk mozzarella cheese and all the ingredients baked in an 800° brick oven.

The rules were set forth by the Italian government in 1997 after professor Carlo Mangoni, a nutrition specialist at the Second University of Naples, was contracted to compile a “rule book” specifying the true techniques and qualifications of Neapolitan pizza. The resulting 42-page treatise covers everything from calorie counts to the actual Homeric origins of pizza. But, the most important context of this document is in the recipe area that tells about the ingredients and the methods of crafting an authentic Neapolitan pizza.

The rules say a certified VPN pizza must be baked on the raw volcanic stone surface of a bell-shaped, wood-fired oven. As a result, the pizza takes on a crisp, bubbly crust and a tangy array of flavors. Only five styles have been noted as truly genuine by the VPN, including Parmigiano-Reggiano, Prosciutto di Parma, and the classic Margherita, a pizza specific to Italy and most popular in true Neapolitan trattorias. It includes San Marzano tomatoes (or plum tomatoes as a substitute), extra-virgin olive oil, fresh basil, fresh mozzarella and Pecorino Romano. The colors of the Italian flag must be represented on the Margherita. According to VPN’s strict rules governing Neapolitan pizzas, the lower crust must be cracker-like: “The bottom must be approximately the thickness of a credit card, while the outer crust should be about the size of a quarter, and very dense. The crust will have black bubbles characteristic to a wood-burning oven and Neapolitan pizza.”

If you would like to learn more about becoming VPN certified, contact veracepizza@sbcglobal.net or call 323 653-5792. Visit PizzaRadio.com for an exclusive interview with Peppe Miele!



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WHAT IS THE APN (ASSOCIAZIONE PIZZAIUOLI NAPOLETANI)?

The Associazione Pizzaiuoli Napoletani (Association of Neapolitan Pizza Makers – or APN) was established in July 1998 in Naples, Italy with the express intent to re-evaluate and preserve a traditional profession in Naples, that of the Pizzaiuolo (pizza maker). While the pizza industry has grown and changed all around the world, the APN is committed to pass down the art of manipulation of the pizza to new generations. It is this belief in the importance of the Pizzaiuolo that will both assure the continuation of a tradition and offer opportunities to young people who wish to insert themselves into this industry and learn this art.

The APN at its core places a value on the role of the Pizzaiuolo, rather than just ingredients and materials. The art of Pizza Napoletana (Neapolitan Pizza) requires an artist whose hands are trained, whose senses are keen and whose experience is tantamount to success. The APN trains Pizzaiuoli in the area of dough production, specific stretching techniques, oven management, and general pizza production.

They offer training courses in both Italy and the United States.

www.pizzaiuolinapoletani.it

licking the domed roof and you can smell the crackling oak, cherry, apple, and maple woods burning. Everything in this place tells your senses that you are in Italy, not New Jersey.

“I wanted to bring Italian culture and real Italian pizza our to America,” Roberto said. “I named the restaurant A Mano, which translated means ‘by hand’. I wanted to bring the art of hand-made, real Italian pizza to the U.S., not just another Domino’s pizza or a New York or Chicago style. . . a real Italian pizza, so I studied pizza at Antonio Starita’s pizza school in Naples. Everything is made by hand (a mano) from the pizza, to the cheese to the desserts that are showcased to customers as they walk through the door.”

ITALIAN FLOUR

The most important thing Roberto learned about pizza under the tutelage of Antonio Starita was the importance of the flour. “It is important to the way we (Italians) do the dough,” Roberto said. “In Italy, using 00 flour is the only way to make it right. The difference in the 00 flour that I use (made by Caputo)



Everything, right down to the desserts, is all hand-made. Displaying the desserts so customers see them when they walk in almost guarantees an up-sell.

is the quality of the wheat and the way the Caputo factory manufacturers and mills the flour. They grind the flour very, very slow. That way the wheat isn’t destroyed. In America, they grind the wheat very fast, which destroys it. What they (Americans) also do is bleach the flour, and in some cases add protein. If I was to put a pizza made with an American flour in my oven, which cooks at 1,000 degrees, it would burn in two seconds.”

ITALIAN: THE DOUGH

The dough that Roberto uses in A Mano is made in the mornings for that evening and the next morning. He says that one of the keys to this traditional style of dough is that it must rise for a minimum of eight hours, which helps to create a very light crust. The dough is made only with fresh yeast, water, Caputo’s 00 flour and salt. It is as simple as it gets. I asked why the typical American style of dough was so much more complex and different. Roberto and Antonio both agreed that the most likely explanation was that pizza was born in Naples, but once its popularity spread, the people who were trying to duplicate what they knew about pizza simply had to make up dough recipes using what they knew about bread making. They didn’t really understand the uniqueness of the traditional pizza dough that originated in Naples. Basically, everyone invented their own style, which helps to explain the many different styles you see in America.

ITALIAN PIZZA-MAKING SCHOOLS

Roberto explains that one of the reasons it’s so difficult to find true Italian pizza in the United States is, unlike in Italy, there are no schools in America where pizzeria owners can learn the art and traditions of pizza-making to become a true pizzaiolo. In Italy, the way to become a true pizza maker is to go to a pizza school. “But the only judge to what is a good pizza is the customer,” Roberto added.

Since there are currently no authentic pizza-making/certifying schools in America, Roberto has come up with a solution. Working with the APN (Associazione di Pizzaiuoli Napoletani, which translated means, “Association of Neapolitan Pizza Makers”) in Italy, anyone in America who wants to learn traditional pizza-making can do so and become certified. The difference here is that the person is becoming certified and not the restaurant. There are subtle differences with food made by hand. You can take the same ingredients and the same oven to make pizzas, but if you have two different pizza-makers, the results will be different more times than not. This is the underlying reason why Roberto is working to bring the standards of the



Pizza

Mast' Nicola: Pecorino Romano, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$7.99
 Marinara: Tomatoes, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$8.99
 Margherita: Fresh Mozzarella, Tomatoes, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$9.99
 Regina Margherita: BUFALA Mozzarella, Tomatoes, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$10.99
 Capricciosa: Fresh Mozzarella, Tomatoes, Artichokes, Mushrooms, Ham, Olives, Basil \$13.99
 Margherita con Salame: Fresh Mozzarella, Tomatoes, Genoa Salame, Basil, Extra Virgin Olive Oil \$11.99
 Funghi: Fresh Mozzarella, Tomatoes, Champignon, Cremini & Shitake Mushrooms, Extra Virgin Olive Oil \$11.99
 Padrino: Caciocavallo Cheese, Tomatoes, Sopresata, Olives, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$13.99
 Academia: Pecorino Toscano, Prosciutto, Cherry Tomatoes, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$14.99
 Quattro Formaggi: Bufala Mozzarella, Parmigiano Reggiano, Gran Cru, Caciocavallo, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$14.99
 Ortolana: Fresh Mozzarella, Tomatoes, Zucchini, Eggplant, Artichokes, Mushrooms, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$13.99
 Mana: Bufala Mozzarella, Prosciutto di Parma Arugula, Cherry Tomatoes, Shaved Gran Cru, Extra Virgin olive Oil \$13.99
 Prosciutto e Arugula: Fresh Mozzarella, Prosciutto, Arugula, Extra Virgin Olive Oil \$12.99
 BAMBINO: (Kids Pizza) Mozzarella, Tomatoes, Extra Virgin Olive Oil, Basil \$5.99

▲ A sample of A Mano's pizza menu.

APN to the United States.

Yes, there are other associations out there, such as Verace Pizza Napoletana (VPN), which is an association that certifies the pizza shop, but what Roberto is attempting to establish in the U.S. is an association that certifies the pizza maker. Roberto is the liaison here in America for the APN, which was founded in Italy. To become certified as an APN pizza maker, one starts by calling Roberto (201-961-5017). From there, you can decide to either schedule training with him in New Jersey or actually travel to Italy to obtain certification there.

To study under Roberto and obtain APN certification, you spend 15 days at his side learning the traditional artisan pizza-making methods that came from Italy. You work with him full time, morning to night, during this training period (the cost is \$3,000). During this time, you learn how to make the dough, sauces, how to cook with wood-fired ovens and various traditional pizza recipes.



Like the rest of the equipment, A Mano's mixer is imported from Italy, thus adding to the authenticity of the restaurant's product.

Roberto designed and built A Mano with the intent of it being a training center for anyone interested in learning to make true Neapolitan Pizza. The set-up of the cooking and prep area has taken this into consideration with the counter, two pizza ovens, and workstations. In as much as the APN certification is being organized, it is not the only reason to train with Roberto. His experience, passion, history, and talent make him and A Mano a natural choice for anyone wishing to learn or improve on pizza making techniques.

Why is there a need for an association of pizza makers? "For me and people like Antonio (his mentor), pizza is not just a way to make money. Pizza is life," Roberto explained. "Pizza is Naples, and Naples is pizza... it is a culture. What other product has remained the same for 300 years? The only difference in my pizzas and what was served 300 years ago is the cheese; the cheese is better now. I will never say that my pizza is better than anyone else's, but it is different than what you see here in the U.S. because it is traditional Naples style... true Italian."

PMQ's Pizza Magazine

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