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PIZZA

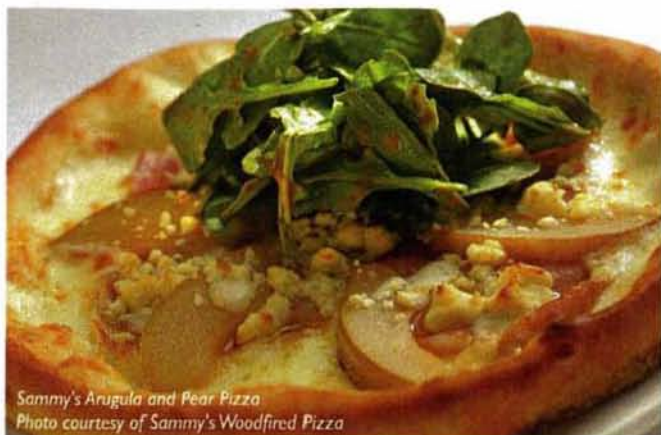
Pizzazz!

BY MARILYN LAROCQUE

Pizza, Italy's contribution to fast food, has captured the culinary imagination of top chefs who have added pizzazz and transformed pizza from takeout to tabletop. Originality vies with tradition.

Although ancient Romans and Greeks topped flatbread with olive oil and herbs, modern pizza originated in the mid-1800s, with Naples the pioneer. Neapolitans are as rabid about protecting their pizza as the French are about their wines. In fact, in 1984 a group of Neapolitans established the Associazione Verace (true/original) Pizza Napoletana, VPN for short, and articulated "rules" for the "authentic" version. They dictate dough ingredients, hand preparation, high-heat baking in a stone oven fired by oak wood, a primary sauce of tomatoes and Mozzarella, and three "purist" varieties—Marinara, Margherita, and Extra Margherita, which requires Mozzarella from Campania.





Sammy's Arugula and Pear Pizza
Photo courtesy of Sammy's Woodfired Pizza



A Settebello pizza
Photo courtesy of Settebello



Mini Duck Tacos at Sammy's Woodfired Pizza
Photo courtesy of Sammy's Woodfired Pizza

Ratcheting up their campaign, in 2009 the VPN acquired “quality control” protection from the European Union’s Commission that determines labeling regulations, obtaining the TSG (Traditional Specialty Guaranteed) mark for “authentic” Neapolitan pizza.

VPN-certified Settebello is a bastion of Neapolitan pizza. Owner Brad Otton fell in love with Neapolitan pizza while living in Italy. “Pizza was peasant food and cost \$1 from a cart,” he commented. His travels spawned Settebello (the most valuable card, “seven of gold,” in an Italian card game, *Scopa*) located in Henderson at The District.

“There was nothing similar in Vegas,” Otton said. “So I went to Naples, thinking I could become a ‘pizzaiolo’ (pizza maker) in three months. I was wrong. They’ve been making pizza the same way for 200 years. You need to have a feel for the dough, how to handle and cook it. So I hired Carmine D’Amato, who had been making pizza for five years. Our Neapolitan stone oven is handmade, and the sand for the mortar came from Mt. Vesuvius.”

Otton also imports many ingredients from Italy...flour from Naples, prosciutto cotta and prosciutto crudo from Parma, San Marzano tomatoes grown in volcanic soils near Mount Vesuvius, and parmesan from Modena. “Nothing compares to Italian ingredients,” he stated.

Settebello concentrates on pizzas, both red and white, plus antipasti, salata, and “dolce.”

The pizza crust is soft, chewy, and foldable. We tackled Quattro Stagioni, a Margherita pizza, with each quarter topped individually—rustic, toasted sausage; spicy salame; roasted mushrooms; or Kalamata olives. We also “created-our-own” Margherita, choosing sweet onions, peppered salame with a kick, and tart artichokes from among 16 toppings.

For dessert, we shared fluffy, delicious tiramisu, one of four “dolces” made in-house (the other three... cannoli, panna cotta, and nutella pizza topped with fresh bananas and slivered almonds). “Dream Bomba” (caramel, peanut butter gelato, and milk chocolate) and Torta della Nonna (lemon pastry cream) are

more of Settebello’s Italian imports.

There’s an incongruity about a French-trained Austrian chef gaining fame with pizza. Nevertheless, when Wolfgang Puck opened Spago in West Hollywood in 1982, his artisan pizza propelled the headlines. Puck had help. Ed LaDou, who, with uber-chef Alice Waters, co-created California-style gourmet pizza, was on board as head pizza chef.

Puck’s interest in pizza began in his early 20s when he was working in southern France at three-star restaurants. “He would go to rural areas of Provence and eat pizzas loaded with great cheeses and made in wood-burning ovens,” explained Tom Kaplan, Senior Managing Partner of the Wolfgang Puck Fine



Dining Group. "It left a strong mark on him. For the Spago Hollywood scene, he introduced gourmet pizza using ingredients like smoked salmon and caviar crème fraiche that people didn't expect on pizza."

Wolfgang Puck Pizzeria & Cucina now occupies the space originally filled by Puck's French-themed Brasserie at Crystals, CityCenter. Executive Chef Dustin Lewandowski described Puck's pizza as "American-style, home-style Italian."

"We make the dough each morning," he continued. "The secret is fresh yeast. A touch of honey helps add sweetness and achieves a golden brown crust. It's a hard skill to perfect, a real craft. It takes time and practice to hand-stretch the dough and make sure it's even throughout, particularly when you're making several pizzas at once. You also have to disperse toppings evenly. It's baked at 550° for about four or five minutes so it acquires a smoky taste; and you get a crisp, yet chewy, crust. You rotate each pizza several times so it bakes and browns evenly."

"Our menu is constantly evolving based on the season and availability of various items. Our most popular pizzas are Margherita, Italian sausage with rapini, and chorizo. To the chorizo we add thinly sliced red potatoes that have been soaked in ice water to remove some starch so they become crisp."

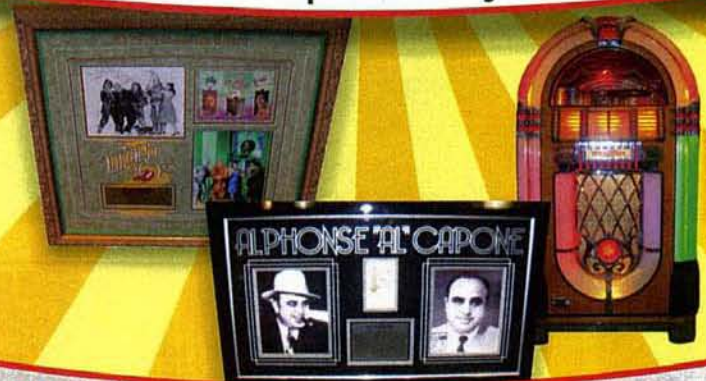
Pizzas are served on a wood plank. Unfortunately, Puck's signature smoked salmon and crème fraiche is missing; however, baby squash blossoms hobnob with cherry tomatoes and ricotta. We enjoyed both the spicy Italian sausage dappled with colorful rapini (baby turnip leaves), and the chorizo with the crunchy potatoes...unusual.

Lest you think Puck forgot the sweets, think again. Buttery cheesecake with chocolate cookie crumb crust, strawberries and crème fraiche was velvety decadence. Sugary Zeppole (beignets) ladled with fabulous caramel sauce were irresistible. Ultimate indulgence was layered tiramisu with shiny dark chocolate "frosting," crunchy melted chocolate granules, and a chocolate curlicue winging off the top.

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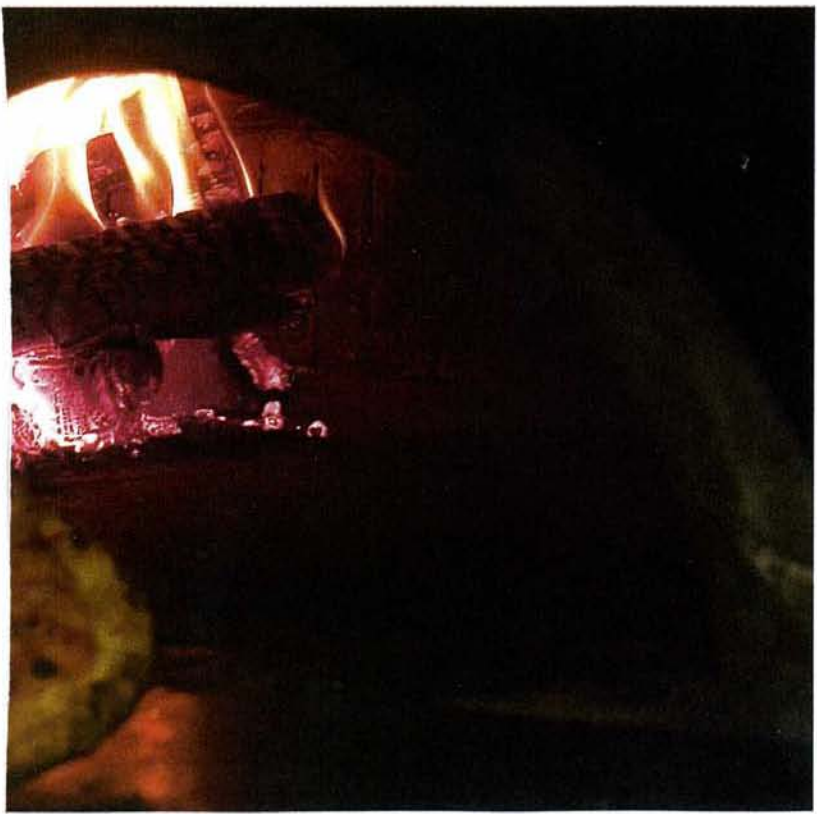


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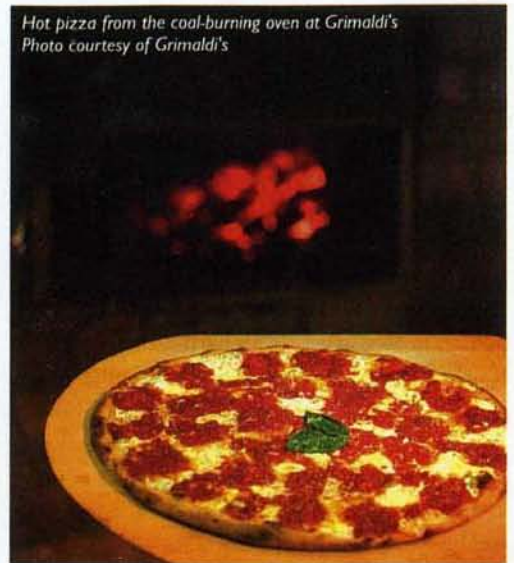
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Hot pizza from the coal-burning oven at Grimaldi's
 Photo courtesy of Grimaldi's

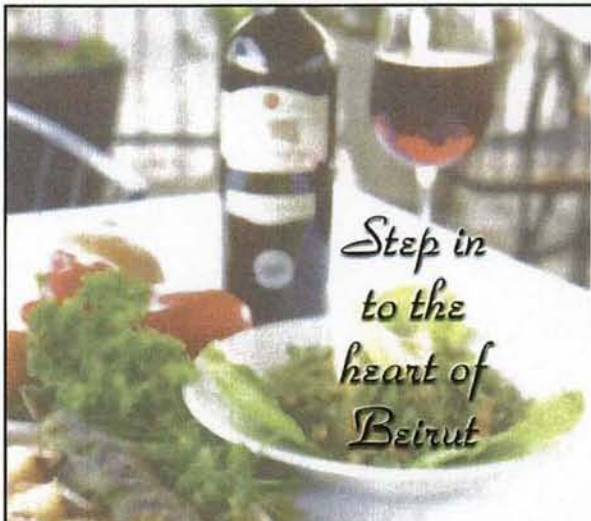





Sammy's Oak Roasted Chicken and Asparagus
 Photo courtesy of Sammy's Woodfired Pizza



Grimaldi's Pizzeria boasts its pizza "made the Brooklyn Bridge famous." Their two Las Vegas outposts, located in Boca Park and Richmar Plaza, are clones. Eschewing wood, they stoke their brick ovens with anthracite coal, buy their sauce ingredients from Italy, recreate New York water with a high-tech filtration system, and acquire "milled-to-order" flour from the Midwest. Their thin-crust, NY-style dough is hand tossed.

"Anthracite coal is clean and burns hot, 1200° degrees," said Grimaldi's Corporate Chef Cory Lattuca. "Pizzas cook in 60-90 seconds. The texture and blend of flour is the same as in New York. We use fresh-crushed Italian tomatoes, hand-sliced homemade Mozzarella shipped from New York, Romano cheeses, olive oil, Italian meats, sweet sausage, and pepperoni. The rest of the flavor is from the oven itself. It gives a crispy chewiness, almost smokiness, to the crust. (By the way, kids get a clump of raw dough to play with at the table.)

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PIZZA PIZZAZ

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"Most New Yorkers want just one or two toppings to enjoy the good cheese, sauce, and crust. Agreement on toppings is virtually impossible. So we'll divide a pizza into quarters with something for everyone. The most popular toppings are pepperoni, mushrooms, and sausage."

Grimaldi's menu sticks to pizzas, calzone, starters, and desserts. They offer personal (12"), small (16"), and large (18") pizzas available in three types—red, white with garlic, and pesto. Twenty toppings provide plenty of choices for "build your own" pizzas.

The thin crust lived up to its hype, light, crunchy, and flavorful. Pesto, chicken, and onions were a delicious combo. Our most zesty mix was pepperoni, Italian sausage, oven roasted sweet red peppers, and fresh garlic. I was the only one who ate the tingling, salty trio of anchovy, dried tomatoes, and artichokes.

Grimaldi's famous original recipe cheesecakes, New York style and Oreo, are complemented by seasonal fruit cobbler cheesecake with granola top, blueberry when we were there...super-rich!

Sammy's Woodfired Pizza is not your typical pizza joint. "We're not Italian either," stated Chef Mike Geller, Corporate Kitchen Manager for all 17 Sammy's (five in Nevada; 12 in California). "We're Mediterranean. Our founder, Sammi Ladeki, is from Lebanon. He trained in the formal hotel apprentice system in Germany. Most of the food is his idea. Our menu represents what's happening in the culinary world."

You'll discover bright, clean flavors with a surprise in each bite. They make nearly two-dozen "wood-fired" pizzas divided into three categories — Rustic Neopolitan, Artisan Thin Crust, and Sammy's "wood-fired," which is available with regular crust, whole-wheat crust, artisan thin crust, or gluten-free crust. All the dough (semolina) is hand-stretched to less than ¼ inch. Pizzas are about 10"-11" in diameter. Pizza dough is made every morning.

Ed LaDou surfaces again, and his barbecue chicken pizza with smoked gouda and sliced red onion is the most popular. Four Neapolitan pizzas mime the rustic approach and use traditional ingredients with Sammi's twist—Caprese, Diavola (salami, smoked gouda, fresh mozzarella, roasted bell peppers, spinach, crushed red chilis), Sicilian (a novelty with fennel sausage and crimini mushrooms), and Tuscan.

The Tuscan has a thin crust and is ladled with a house sauce of tomatoes, Romano cheese, herbs, basil, oregano, salt, pepper, garlic, and olive oil. It's lavished with prosciutto, artichokes, Kalamata olives, fresh mozzarella, organic arugula, and extra virgin olive oil. Greens sprout from the top. Marvelous flavor and color!

Sauce for the garlic chicken pizza resembles a confit of garlic that's roasted in the oven, then puréed and mixed with olive oil and rice vinegar. Unique choices that are almost dessert like are Feta Manouri Cheese artisan pizza with mild sheep cheese from Macedonia drizzled with orange blossom honey and sprinkled with fresh oregano and arugula/pear pizza with mozzarella and gorgonzola. Amazing!

And for the finale, the Messy Sundae is obligatory...vanilla ice cream in a 19-oz. glass overflowing with chocolate sauce, caramel sauce, walnuts, and whipped cream. Sweet excess! □