

TROPICAL LIFE

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HAWAIIAN PIZZA AT BERTONI'S

PHOTOS BY ALEX KOLYER/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

SILHOUETTED PIZZA PHOTOS BY MAURICE COHN BAND/MIAMI HERALD STAFF



PIZZA ALLA CAPRESE AT FRATELLI LA BUFALA

PIE IN THE SKY

A South Florida guide to great gourmet pizza



CARPACCIO PIZZA AT SOSTA

BY VICTORIA PESCE ELLIOTT
Special to The Miami Herald

I have tasted the future and it is scorched and puffy, layered with red sauce and topped with melted mozzarella.

If ever there was a national pizza moment, this is it. It seems serious chefs all got the memo to start studying the ancient craft of pizza making, adding gourmet touches in search of their own piece of the pie. (It doesn't hurt that the economy is more in tune with peasant bread than pam-

pered beef, of course.)

I have had the pleasure of dining at two of the nation's foremost pizza purveyors, Jim Lahey's Co. in Manhattan and Nancy Silverton's Pizzeria Mozza in Los Angeles, and am happy to report that we've got some worthy contenders of our own.

To qualify as makers of new-generation gourmet pizza, these restaurants do Old World style baking in a brick or stone oven that might burn wood, gas or, in the case of the Brooklyn-style, coal.

In the words of baking guru Peter Reinhart, "crust is at least 80 percent of the pizza experience. The crust is the unifier... and the toppings play off of it."

To my mind — and in Neapolitan tradition — the perfect crust has some lightness and bubbles in its puffy edge (the result of long proofing), and comes to a thin conclusion in the center. As for sauce, it should be made of fresh crushed tomatoes

*TURN TO PIZZA, 4E



MAGHERITA FLOR DI LATTE AT PIZZA VOLANTE



VEGETARIAN PIZZA AT ECCO PIZZATECA



ARUGULA PIZZA AT JOEY'S ITALIAN CAFE

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PIE IN THE SKY

South Florida guide to gourmet pizza

*PIZZA, FROM IE

or canned ones imported from the famed San Marzano region south of Naples, cooked briefly if at all to retain bright flavor.

These pizzas are eaten with a knife and fork and, though it's fun to share, the dough usually is so thin that one pie per person is about right. For comparison purposes, I had margheritas (tomato sauce, basil and mozzarella) everywhere, but also tried a good number of exotic toppings, which I mention when noteworthy.

I've sampled more good South Florida pizza in the past three months than I have had here in my lifetime. I may have missed your favorite spot, but I can guarantee these nine are worth a visit.

LAURENZO'S

Since 1951, Laurenzo's Market in North Miami Beach has been keeping fans up to their ears in all things Italian. And for decades, it has kept the fires burning in a classic wood-burning oven that looks like a little white trullo house from Puglia. It's the pizzamaker, Calabrian-born Carlo Amarini, who's new. The current pies are tasty, though some get slightly soggy in the center from a too-cool oven. Not to worry, says Chef Carlo, who came onboard in February; a new oven is in the works.

ANTHONY'S

Anthony Bruno (Anthony's Runway 84) opened a namesake pizzeria to satisfy his cravings for New York-style pizza, and now presides over a mini empire of more than a dozen Anthony's Coal-Fired Pizzas that recently expanded into Miami-Dade. Brutally hot coal-burning ovens (more than 800 degrees) create crusts with edges as dark as, well, as coal. Best toppings include broccoli rabe and sausage.

The pie is a bit thicker than a most, and if the original margherita pizza was meant to look like an Italian flag, Anthony's must be meant to mimic the moon with its dark craters of sauce amid blackened pools of cheese. Which is not to say it is not a triumph: When done



ALEX KOLYER/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

LAURENZO'S: Margherita, left, arugula and tomato and, for dessert, chocolate hazelnut are among the options.

just right, it can be a revelation in crunchy, crusty, blistered goodness.

FRATELLI LA BUFALA

This charming pizzeria at the corner of Fifth and Washington has been a Miami Beach magnet for Italians since it opened in 2005. Family tradition and a super-charged wood-burning oven are the secrets to the quintessential pie made with real buffalo mozzarella imported from a brother's farm in Naples.

Fratelli turns out fine, bubbly pies, expertly scorched and thin with a nice puff of crust on the edges. The fresh cheese tends to pool and make the middle soggy, a common problem with authentic pies. Hence, the knife and fork.

JOEY'S

Less than a year old, Joey Goldman's elegant namesake in edgy Wynwood has made friends of police officers, construction workers, politicians, artists and society mavens alike. Chef Ivo Mazzon, a talented and passionate 30-year-old from the Veneto region of northeastern Italy with a culinary degree from the Cooking Institute in Treviso, was a full-fledged pizzaiolo (pizza maker) by age 13.

His crust is firm yet

chewy, crisped and beautifully charred with petite puffs of air inside. The margherita is a bit heavy on the cheese but loaded with fresh basil grown on the spot. It is his signature dolce e piccante that won my heart: a simple crust dotted with slivers of sweet figs, melty Gorgonzola cheese, hot pepper flakes and drizzles of flowery honey that I could eat for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

PIZZA VOLANTE

Jonathan Eismann, the James Beard-nominated chef who moved his popular Pacific Time to the Design District, has turned heads with his industrial-looking Pizza Volante in the old Secret Sandwich Company space. There's a mozzarella bar with a variety of imported orbs (stored and served too cold, unfortunately), a fantastic budget array of wines by the tumbler and a superb selection of pies.

The oven, a Milano-made Ambrogi, burns oak at some 700 degrees, making for a nicely charred crust with a perfect bite and crunch. Favorites include the Margherita di Bufala DOP and the Volante 100, topped with ingredients such as tender baby arugula sourced within 100 miles.

ECCO PIZZATECA

Another in the pizza club category is downtown's Ecco Pizzateca, which takes its decorating cues from the Lincoln Road Segafredo's with mismatched sofas and love seats done in crushed velvet. Mirrors and oversized chandeliers add to the look, as does a curvy, size 2 brunette in a dress that fits more like a bathing suit.

With more than two dozen pizzas, this spot has more variety and attitude than others I visited. The pizza — larger than most at nearly 12 inches — has the right look: a tawny-edged crust, clearly hand-formed and gently browned without too much cheese. The pinkish sauce, however, was so thin it nearly ran off the point of each slice. Still,

with its perfectly judicious smattering of basil chiffonade, it is a delicious, Italian-style pie.

SOSTA

Quattro Gastronomica Italiana's sexy Sosta ("pause") on Lincoln Road gets the proportions of the holy trinity of cheese, sauce and crust just right, with a nicely singed crust, a thin-as-can-be layer of red sauce and an even smattering of smoothly melted cheese covering the whole surface. I would rather see the basil fresh atop the finished pie than baked under the cheese, but that is a small thing. Carmine Leocata, past winner of and chief judge of the Campionato Mondiale della Pizza (pizza world championship), insisted on bringing in the Morello Forni, a rotating brick oven from Piedmont that accounts for Sosta's even and perfect results.

BERTONI

A surprising standout is the brand-new Bertoni across Biscayne Boulevard from Florida International University's Biscayne Bay Campus. The quirky Argentine-owned pizzeria attached to a carwash looks more like a South Beach club with its stunning mosaic murals, sleek furnishings and mood music. (There's a Bertoni in Coconut Grove, too.)

A real pizzaiolo in a puffy cap feeds pies into the jaws of a handsome oven. Though available by the slice, the pizzas are best whole and topped with my favorite, arugula. The wafer-thin crust bears the badges of a wood-burning oven: gentle scorch marks on the edges and slight bubbles in the

chewy crust. The chef has a restrained hand with the sauce but is overly generous with the mozzarella (the handmade kind, at least). Superior fresh herbs, additional grated Parmigiano-Reggiano and a friendly staff are also pluses.

PIZZA FUSION

Pizza Fusion has grabbed hold of the eco-organic movement with earth-friendly ingredients, a healthful multigrain crust loaded with oats, rye, millet, barley, flax seed and sesame seed plus



CUSTOM MADE PIZZA AT PIZZA FUSION

PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD FILE

a line of gluten-free pizzas (and dessert). The unusual rectangular pizzas cooked in a soapstone rotating gas oven are tasty, crisp and delicious — more like a cracker than a bread lovers' pizza. This pleasant spot where nearly 80 percent of ingredients are organic and much is local is just the ticket for vegans, the eco-conscious and those who avoid gluten or dairy. We're big fans in my house.

CASALE

South Beach's just-opened Casale is a shrine to fresh mozzarella, made on the premises. The massive space backed up to

the bustling Sardinia is low-key and handsome with low-slung sofas, a brown and tan palette and a great soundtrack.

Baked in a pair of scorchingly hot, Australian pine-burning ovens, these thin and complex masterpieces are gently blackened but pillowy and pliant with a subtle saltiness, topped with exceptional ingredients.

A favorite is the hearty Sag Harbor, an ode to owner Pietro Vardeau's stint in the Hamptons. A sturdy crust supports a thin layer of sauce, plump mussels, clams, tiny octopus and snappy shrimp with just a bit of pecorino cheese for saltiness.

Victoria Pesce Elliott is The Miami Herald's Miami restaurant critic. E-mail her at velliott@miamiherald.com.

CASALE: Chef-owner Pietro Vardeu, left, and co-owner Tony Gallo with their margherita.

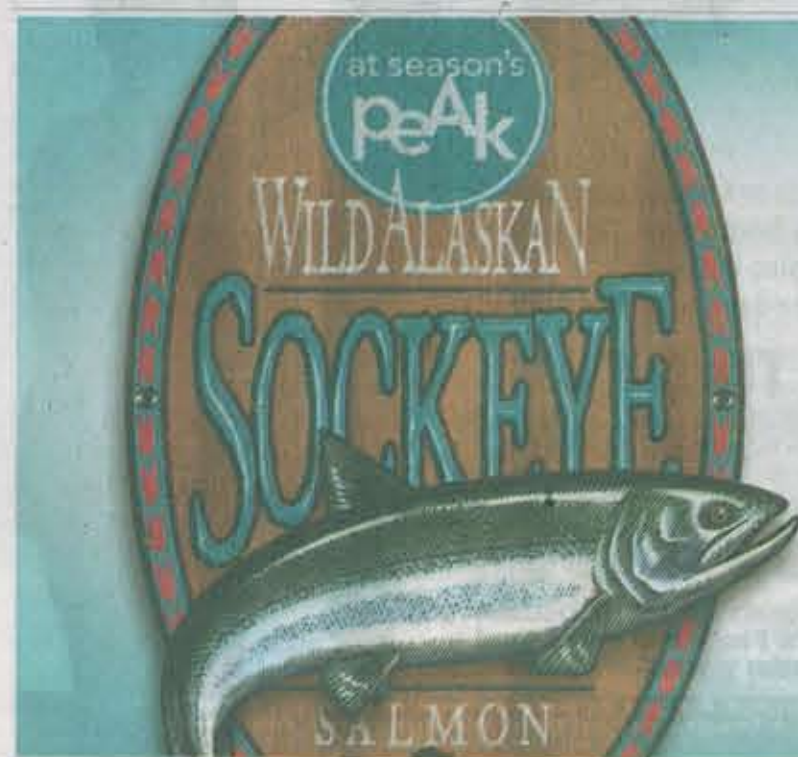


J. ALBERT DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD FILE

ANTHONY'S: Company president Nick Castaldo, vice-president and chief operating officer Michelangelo Mozzicato and founder Anthony Bruno at the Fort Lauderdale flagship location.



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