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Pizza for Purists From Naples Ovens

By NELSON MOE

IN Naples, in a quiet side street off the bustling Corso Umberto I, a small, rather nondescript pizzeria marks the edge of the popular quarter called Forcella. Travelers, distracted by the brighter lights of other restaurants down the road, would hardly notice the pizzeria if they happened in this area by chance. But here, at Pizzeria Condurro, much better known as Da Michele, the ancient Neapolitan tradition of cooking and eating pizza is re-enacted daily in its purest form.

Here devotees from all over Naples and from the outlying towns that cling to the lava slopes of Mount Vesuvius file in to take a seat at the gray marble-top tables, under the grand mirrors that lend Da Michele the flavor of a music hall.

Often without saying a word, just nodding or glancing according to a familiar code, regulars will give the waiter their order — a pizza marinara, or Margherita, the only kinds Da Michele serves.

The marinara consists of tomato sauce spiced with oregano and chunks of garlic spread over a half-inch-thick crust slightly larger than an average dinner plate. The name, meaning marine style is puzzling, as it has nothing resembling seafood upon it.

The Margherita is named after Queen Margherita of the House of Savoy, who sang its praises after tasting it for the first time on a visit to Naples in 1889. This version is made with tomato sauce spread on the crust, then sprinkled with chunks of a local cheese called fior di latte, a dash of pecorino (or parmesan) and a few sprigs of basil. Before either type of pizza is baked, a mixture of olive and soy oil is poured over the pie, moistening it and heightening the flavor of the ensemble of ingredients, which are, seasons permitting, fresh and local.

For over 100 years Da Michele has nourished Neapolitans rich and poor, famous and infamous, on such simple fare. And those who come here know better than to ask for variations on these sacred themes. Indeed, a poem on a large wall placard, in Neapolitan dialect, reminds customers of Da Michele's popular, purist philosophy: "Ever since the days of affluence, all people can think of is finance, and even the lowly pauper wants to buy a fancy pizza. . . . But don't ask us for complicated pizzas. They're a hassle to make, they

empty your purse, and leave you with a stomachache."

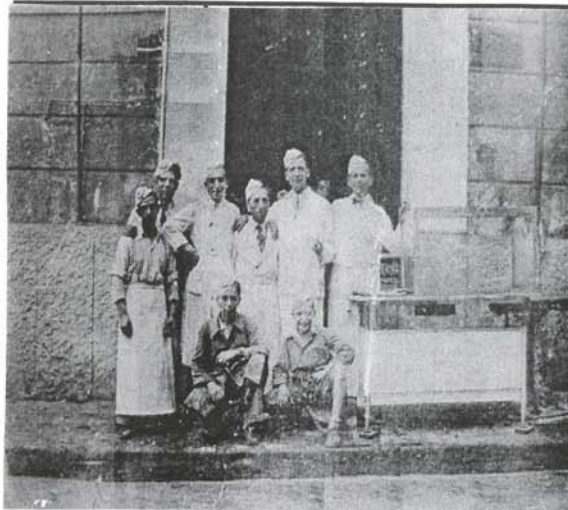
As if to safeguard the sanctity of the tradition, a figure of St. Antonio Abate, the patron saint of bakers, enshrined in a neon-lit glass case, watches over the scene from above the brick oven, assisted in his surveillance by Don Michele himself as he glances severely from a photograph. In recent years another photo has been added: Diego Armando Maradona, the soccer player.

Salvatore Condurro, the eldest of Don Michele's four sons, who now run the business, discussed the basics: "The first thing's the crust, it's got to be soft and light. That's why we always prepare the dough the day before it's used, using the smallest amount of yeast possible, letting it rise about 15 hours. Most places these days pour in loads of yeast to make the dough rise instantly. The result is a tough crust with a yeasty taste."

According to Mr. Condurro, the quality of the tomatoes and cheese is equally important. The pizzeria uses the sweet San Marzano tomatoes grown in the Sarno Valley just south of Naples (fresh during the summer months, canned during the winter), and the fior di latte cheese, produced in the Agerola region on the Sorrento peninsula. Fior di latte, made with cow milk rather than the water buffalo milk usually used for mozzarella, maintains its soft consistency better than mozzarella in the great heat of the wood-burning ovens.

The ingredients are only the beginning of a superlative pizza. The preparation of these raw materials is the domain of the pizzaiuolo, the maestro of dough handling. It takes an

Naples



Angelo R. Turetta/Lucky Star

Preparing dough for crust at Pizzeria Da Michele.

apprenticeship of two to three years to become a full-fledged pizzaiuolo, a time of "watching and watching some more," according to Luigi Condurro, who has been making pizzas at Da Michele since 1937.

When the order comes, the pizzaiuolo,

standing at a marble-topped counter, takes a small bun of dough from a nearby wooden box and gently flattens it out on the counter by hand to the pie shape. He sprinkles on the toppings, calling over to his fornaio — baker and oven-tender — for the pala, a long wood-

en stuck with a flat end. With a swift gesture, the pizzaiuolo slips the pizza onto the pala, which, in turn, the fornaio deftly flings into the blazing oven.

These igloo-shaped wood-burning brick ovens, often covered with colorful ceramic tiles, cook the pizza in less than two minutes. The fires are usually stoked with small chunks of poplar or oak, which maintain a hot flame and give a savory aroma to the pizza. While in the oven the pizza is kept perilously close to the flames, turned a few times with a metal rod to insure even cooking. Just before the pizza is ready, the fornaio tosses a handful of wood shavings onto the fire, producing a brief, intense blaze that cooks the pizza quickly without toughening it or drying it out. When the fornaio sees the right color of the crust, he draws the pizza out.

Local pizza connoisseurs concur that Da Michele serves the classic Neapolitan pizza in its authentic form. But simplicity isn't always for everyone, and just across the street another of Naples's traditional pizzerias attracts its own loyal following: Pizzeria Trianon - Da Ciro. Here you'll find a full range of those "complicated" pizzas Da Michele scorns: the quattro stagioni (with mozzarella, mushrooms, seafood, anchovies and capers, divided into four separate sections), the capricciosa (a similar panoply of ingredients mixed together), alla pescatora (mus-

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sels, baby clams, shrimp and squid) and numerous others. A *salsicce e friarelli* is a local specialty with sausage and a spinachlike green that grows only in the countryside around Naples, cooked in olive oil, garlic and Italian hot red pepper.

In the evenings, Carminiello the accordion player livens up the mirrored rooms of both Trianon and Da Michele, winding among the crowded tables as he plays through the endless repertory of Neapolitan songs. A family of 15 or 20 sitting around a table, presided over by the patriarch and singing such favorites as "You want to play the American, but, tough luck kid, you were born in Italy" is not an uncommon sight.

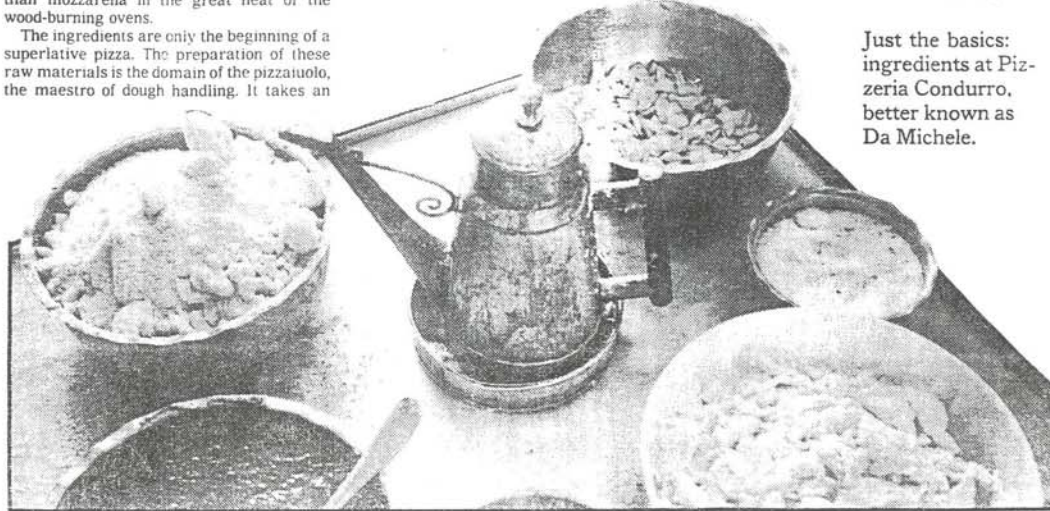
While Forcella, the heart of working-class Naples, is home to two of the city's great popular pizzerias, the Centro Storico, just up the road, is home of a number of fine pizzerias of a rather different ilk. These cook the entire range of Neapolitan-style pizzas, but in addition serve a variety of dishes — antipastos, pasta, fish, desserts — which can either complement or take the place of pizza. With their wood-paneled walls, separate tables and mellow lighting, these cater to customers in search of a more refined dining experience, without accordions and mirrors.

The two most renowned of this type are Ristorante-Pizzeria Lombardi a Santa Chiara and Antica Pizzeria Port'Alba. The former was founded a century ago by Enrico Lombardi, who sold pizza in Brazil for years before setting up shop in Naples. His grandsons Alfonso and Luigi recommend their pizza alla Lombardi, made with tomato sauce and provola, a kind of smoked mozzarella cheese.

Antica Pizzeria Port'Alba was founded in 1830 and maintains it is the oldest pizzeria in Italy, if not the world. The present owner, Vincenzo Luciano, is the fifth generation in the family to run the business. Their specialty is the plump pizza Port'Alba, a kind of quattro stagioni with a miniature calzone of ricotta, mozzarella and salami in the middle.

OUTSIDE the historic center of Naples, one often finds crowds clustered around the doorway of a small street-level apartment — a basso. In the middle of the crowd, a woman usually hovers over a kettle of oil boiling on the doorstep, making pizza fritta, fried pizza, a typical midday snack. Customers slip her a thousand-lira note and hurry off to school, to work, to the market, eating their pizza folded in quarters. As a cheap, regular meal, as a break from the pasta routine or as a fast-food snack, pizza in Naples is a way of life. ■

Just the basics: ingredients at Pizzeria Condurro, better known as Da Michele.



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