

which flares up and licks the crust. The hot pizzas are rushed to the tables on huge flat white plates (they used to be served directly on the marble tables), where eager customers cut them into huge wedges, fold the triangles in half to form a sandwich, and eat them out of hand. The ever-so-slightly-charred crust is thin and crisp but with toothsome elasticity toward the center, and the mozzarella forms creamy puddles that flow into the marinara. I've never tasted any piece of food that is lighter, brighter in flavor, more digestible, more satisfying, more delicious.

The crust is so ethereal because it's barely yeasted and rises very slowly overnight. And of course, the best mozzarella in the world is made on dairy farms around Naples. Fresh mozzarella from Campania doesn't even faintly resemble the blocks of chalk that are commonly piled on pizza here. They are tender, delicately chewy balls of just fermented whole milk cured in lightly salted water. Da Michele doesn't use buffalo milk mozzarella, which has more character than *fior de latte*, but is a little more watery. Yet, on a da Michele pizza you admire the milkiness of the *fior de latte*, as you do the essence of each of its few ingredients, and marvel at how miraculously they all work together. Da Michele only makes two kinds of pizza, one with cheese and one without. Though I'd never waste a precious opportunity to eat a pizza margherita here, ordered with extra cheese of course, I imagine that the even simpler one with only crust, tomato sauce and olive oil must have its own unique charm.

Before I got to da Michele (closed on Sunday), I tried another ancient pizza place across the street from it called Trianon, which had a beautiful tiled beehive-shaped pizza oven, marble tables and a lyrical Art Deco sign. Trianon does offer buffalo milk mozzarella as a topping on its pizzas as well as items like anchovies, artichokes, sausage and winter greens. I thought pizza couldn't get much better than Trianon's until I tasted Michele's, which turned out to be the ultimate. It must be the technique, which has been passed down by family members for more than 150 years, that accounts for this pizza's wondrous perfection.

Though it's hard to keep yourself from eating pizza all day, restraint will allow you to sample some of the other specialties of Naples, like deep-fried strips of dough (*zeppole*), rice balls (*arancini*), eggplant (*melanzane*), and crisp croquettes with creamy fillings (*panzarotti*). This is street food in Naples and people buy little white bags of the fried tidbits to nibble on as they walk. I sampled one of each at the fried-

food stand (*friggatoria*) on the narrow via Tribunali, and then ate a whole bag of *panzarotti*. Amazingly, signed photos of President Clinton surrounded by Secret Service men graced the walls. (Leave it to Bill to sniff out the fried food. In this case, he found something really good.)

At every turn, Naples defied my preconceptions. The exquisitely refurbished National Gallery at the top of Capodimonte hill houses one of the greatest collections of 14th to 16th century paintings in the world — including a rivetingly sensual Caravaggio, "The Flagellation," dramatically situated and lit. And the National Archaeological Museum, full of Greco-Roman treasures (my favorites are the astoundingly expressive representational mosaics from Pompeii), has recently opened a "Secret Room" of ancient priapic art to the public, but visitors must make an appointment — we did it on the spot — to be taken on a guided tour by, it turns out, young female university students. (Who are the museum officials trying to protect?)

At the small La Cantina di Triunfo you get to try ancient Neapolitan dishes, recipes that originated hundreds of years ago. You must have a reservation and you need to be able to understand at least culinary Italian because the menu is recited verbally. But choosing between two dishes for each course of the prix fixe meal isn't that difficult, especially since you can gesture toward plates on neighboring tables.

That night, the open kitchen prepared a superb, very al dente spaghetti tossed with invisible anchovies, olive oil, hot red pepper and bread crumbs. Flavor exploded from this bowl of naked looking pasta. Thick, al dente, pasta ribbons in a puree of dried fava beans and bacon tasted medieval. A thick slice of veal was smothered in a spicy hot sauce of black and green peppercorns, onions and bay leaves. Small shrimp were charmingly cooked on lemon leaves, topped with a lemony gratin of bread-crumbs. Contorni, side dishes, of crispy fried potatoes and melting zucchini braised in olive oil struck me as quiet masterpieces. For dessert, almond cake was garnished with lemon cream, candied orange zest and orange syrup; while a lemon custard tart shimmered under a black currant gelee. Sounds like a lot of

lemon, but you never tire of it here.

You choose wine by picking out a bottle from the tasting bar at the front of this small cantina, or by leaving it to the waiter who came up with a beauty, Shabaka Salento 1998 from Berendegna, a deep, vivacious red. At the end of the evening, our hostess brought over tiny etched glasses of her own sweet liqueur, which tasted like toasted hazelnuts. We admired it so much, she gave us seconds.

On another evening we visited — with reservations of course — Mimi alla Ferrovia, a popular trattoria by the central train station. Suddenly we were in the middle of raffish old Naples, or maybe a "Sopranos" shoot. The two frantic brothers who run this Neapolitan institution treat their colorful regulars like royalty, but ignored us. This disregard didn't apply to all the women in the restaurant. A blonde with long red fingernails in a pastel blue suit with padded shoulders held court at the head of a table of men, who tucked napkins into their shirt fronts, held forks in their fists and paid her unctuous attention. The food and wine appeared at this table very quickly.

But the two of us had to fight for everything — fabulous vegetable antipasti such as cold Italian broccoli that we dressed ourselves with fragrant Amalfi lemon, sea salt and full-bodied olive oil; sweet and sour fried zucchini; pointy little green peppers lightly battered and deep-fried; deep-fried, meat-stuffed red peppers; a big half sphere of luscious, tangy, buffalo milk mozzarella; warm artichokes with smoky black olives. They were scrumptious, but we had to force our waiter to bring each one by threatening to serve ourselves from the antipasti table.

He poured us a red wine that he had pulled down from above a pastry refrigerator, without giving us a preliminary taste. It was so vinegary you could smell it across the room. At that point a brother came over and service improved. We ate spaghetti more al dente than I've ever had (it's served progressively chewier the further south you go), tossed with four different species of tiny clams; and a perfect fish fry of small rouget-like fish, three different kinds of shrimp and cuttlefish. A big pile of arugula, luminously yet minimally dressed in salt, red wine vinegar and olive oil, refreshed the palate. And for dessert there were fragrant *fragolini*, tiny wild strawberries, and a slushy fresh lemon ice dispensed from a machine, made with those fat, meaty, green-fleshed local lemons.

We couldn't help patting ourselves on the back

restaurant, until we got into the cab and had to hold on for dear life. One thing I should tell you is that cab drivers in Naples use their meters impressionistically. At no time did we ever pay the amount on the meter and we were often driven to our destination the long way. Fine. Who cares about a few lira? The dollar is strong. But this cab driver, a young wannabe gangster, drove 80 mph on not-so-empty midnight streets while yelling on his cell phone and employing the famous Neapolitan hand gestures. When it was over I dropped some lira onto the front seat and gave him a famous American hand gesture. He didn't need the canon's scholarly work to interpret its meaning. I was catching on. ◉

IF YOU GO

Food: L'Antica Pizzeria da Michele, via Cesare Sersale (corner of via Colletta), 081-553-9204. Pizza and beer about \$4 a person.