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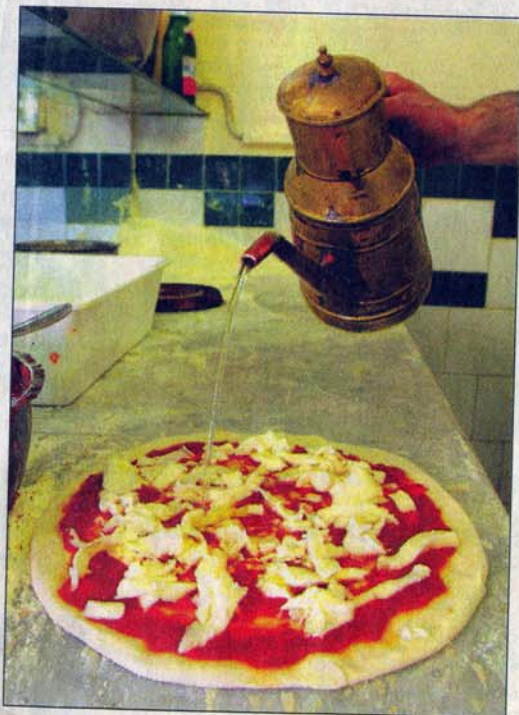
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HOW ITALIANS REALLY EAT | An occasional look at some of Italy's favorites



Naples, by Pizza Possessed

By DANIEL WILLIAMS
Washington Post Foreign Service



The *pizzaiuolo*, the pizzamaker, shuffled his feet nervously as he stood by the stern judge. He was defending his pizza's crust—it was crunchy. Unfortunately for the contestant, crunchy is a no-no in the heartland of pizza production. "Stupid move," the judge said tersely. "Why enter a contest of Neapolitan pizza if you can't make one the right way?"

A hard crust may be something consumers across the globe associate with 21st-century pizza, but here crackle is unthinkable. Chewy is also out. Crust is not even a proper description for the billowy circumference of pizza. Neapolitans call it the crown, and it is as thin and light as pastry.

This may all sound like a kind of snobbery, but in fact, it's quite the opposite. The humblest pizzerias in the poorest neighborhoods of Naples produce the most exquisite and the truest pizzas in Italy and, Neapolitans would argue, on Earth. In Italy, the phenomenon of elevating common foods to a high plane is widespread. The greatest defenders of foods that Italians habitually eat, things that are practically staples in the diet, are the chefs and diners in the most modest of neighborhoods. Italians resist the notion that simple, cheap foods—and you don't get much simpler in Italy than the pizza—inevitably means low quality, mass production and a murky standardization. They are on guard against a kind of globalization boomerang. Italian foods that



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Customers at Da Michele in Naples still enjoy pizza made in two classic ways—either *marinara* or *margherita*.

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In Naples, Defense of the 'True' Pizza

ITALY, From F1

have won the hearts of consumers worldwide return to Italy in adulterated form: frozen, thick-crust, piled with ingredients, as if volume could make up for artistry.

In Naples, defense of "la vera pizza," the true pizza, is also defense of a thing called *napolitana*—the way of being Neapolitan. Naples was once capital of its own kingdom, a branch of Bourbon Spain. Massive, if rundown palaces, fronted by giant gates leading into spacious interior courtyards, attest to an opulent era. Italy's 19th-century unification, by force of arms—and by northerners!—spelled the end of Naples' greatness. Except in the mind of Neapolitans. The city may now be the capital of poverty, as an Italian writer once put it, but it is still a capital. Neapolitans stubbornly cling to their staccato, much-caricatured dialect. Their tunes still set the standards of Italian melody. No one is remotely self-conscious about singing out "O Sole Mio" or "Santa Lucia." Naples aristocracy may be penniless, but common folk greet down-and-out *principessas* with courtly courtesy. Heroes here are heroes forever. Sophia Loren may live mostly in New York, but in Naples, she's a goddess. The Argentine soccer star Maradona fell on hard, drug-soaked times, but in Naples he is continually revered for bringing the city an Italian championship more than a decade ago. Naples has been stripped of its royal status, trade routes have passed it by, and the city is notorious for pickpockets and organized crime, but by golly, they can't take away pizza.

The True Neapolitan Pizza Association has been lobbying the European Union to declare pizza as made in Naples a trademark, like Champagne or Roquefort cheese. "Pizza should reflect Neapolitan traditions, if it wants to be called

devoted to chronicling pizza lore. "There are canons! There are rules! Everything else is a trick."

The basics of "real pizza" are simple enough. The pasta, or dough, is made with flour, water, salt and leaven. The dough, formed into bocce-ball-shaped lumps, must be let to stand on a wooden counter for 15 hours. It must be flattened and spun into its thin round shape by hand. It must be baked in a wood-burning oven, three minutes maximum. The crown should not be burned. Toppings must be fresh, but that's all Neapolitans agree on. Some Neapolitans admit things like anchovies or ham. But there's a fundamentalist school that asserts the authenticity of only two pizza toppings: marinara (tomatoes, olive oil and oregano) and margherita (tomatoes, mozzarella, basil and olive oil).

Not coincidentally, perhaps, both received royal stamps of approval in Naples' mythical past. Marinara pizza was served at the 17th-century court of King Ferdinand IV and his wife Maria Carolina d'Austria. Ferdinand was regarded as an idiotic monarch, but he charmed the Neapolitans by speaking dialect and taking delight in common pleasures. Pizza was served in the royal palace at Capodimonte at the climax of otherwise sumptuous meals. Carolina declared it "more delicious than any other appetizing dish."

At the end of the 19th century, another queen immortalized a variety of pizza. Queen Margherita, of the Savoy family that ruled over a united Italy, ordered a takeout pizza. For the occasion, the pizzeria sent up one topped with tomato, mozzarella and basil—red, white and green, the colors of the Italian flag. Exquisite, Margherita said as she chowed down. The pizzaiuolo, Raffaele Esposito, asked to name the pizza after her. She consented, and the margherita was born.



BY PRESSPHOTO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Margherita pizza features tomatoes, mozzarella, basil and olive oil.

only two kinds of pizzas served at Da Michele, a Puritan pizzeria in the Forcella district. "Let's be honest. The classic pizzas are the marinara and the margherita," said Michele Condurro, the fourth-generation owner.

"Here, we are purists. If you want ham, go to the grocery store."

Da Michele is a museum of napolitanita. The cone-shaped ovens share space with the main dining room. The tables are marble-

topped, the traditional style. Pizza catechisms, in Naples dialect, adorn the walls. One reads: "Ever since the days of affluence, people think only of finance. Even the pauper wants a fancy pizza, but don't ask for a complicated one here—they're a hassle to make!"

On another wall, a portrait of St. Antonio Abate, the patron saint of pizzaiuolos, hangs framed by neon lights. Customers still eat pizza in the classical fashion—by folding the pizza twice into a triangular envelope. Condurro remembers his late father attentively overseeing his pizzamakers day after day, observing them as they spun the dough into a thin disk and thrust it into the wood fire.

An elderly uncle, Luigi, has worked in Da Michele since he was 13. "In those days, you didn't eat pizza off a plate. Just off the marble."

He quickly wandered off to prepare pizzas for the burgeoning crowd. "When I watch Don Luigi make a pizza, it's like watching a painter at his easel," Condurro said.

"He distributes the mozzarella and tomato with grace, always in the open where people can watch. You notice that the lights are bright here. Pizza needs to be scrutinized. Darkness, excused by the desire for atmosphere, is just a way to keep people from seeing the contents."

Pizza was always a takeout business. Until the arrival of cardboard boxes after World War II, deliverymen carried pizzas through the streets of Naples in cylindrical metal containers called *stuffas*. They would chant as they sold. Madison Avenue had nothing on their sales pitches: "I'm right out of the oven, full of tomato and mozzarella, to provide the passion to the woman—so bella."

Spinning the pizza dough is not considered showboating in Naples—it is the best insurance the dough will be thin. Only dough that has been left to ferment overnight has the elasticity to withstand proper spinning. People in Naples still talk about the pizzaiuolo who spun a pizza into a diameter of more than two yards.

With this legacy in mind, the pizzaiuolos at the pizza contest were

understandably nervous. The test took place in the baser an elementary school near no, south of Naples. Some tants shook as they presented products to the judges. The the hard-crust pizza was out-and-out disqualification. not be too critical. It took for the oven to warm up," th said.

They acknowledged a va toppings here. The winner lemon-flavored pizza, althou crowd pleaser was one made or the new European curren euro: pepperoni stood in l coins.

Such flourishes do not g well in Naples, however. Th annual pizza festival, held i tember, features only marg Judge Amito Caputo, owne flour mill, explained. "In I when you order a pizza, it' matically understood to be a erita," he said.

The pizza has soul here, a can't alter soul.

Daniel Williams is The Post Rome bureau chief. This is t second in an occasional seri about what Italians REALL

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