

A Pizza Odyssey

Michael Bauer launches his quest to find the Bay Area's best pies with Pizza Friday, a weekly multimedia feature on his blog. But first he samples some of the nation's best.

Michael Bauer, Chronicle Restaurant Critic

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As I bit through a slice of pizza at Pizzeria Mozza in Los Angeles, the tomato sauce and cheese seared the roof of my mouth. But that didn't stop me. I continued to eat until I had devoured every last bit of the blistered, chewy crust.

This was my pizza epiphany. I've had a lot of pizza in my years as a restaurant critic, but I certainly never considered myself an expert or thought much about what makes one different from the other. This pizza was different, and got me thinking about why this seemingly innocuous dish engenders so much passion.

Every time The Chronicle writes about pizza - whether it was rating the best pizzas in the Bay Area two years ago or the more recent story about the pizzaiolo at Pyzano's Pizzeria in Castro Valley who won a major Neapolitan pizza contest in Naples, but doesn't have the oven here to make the pie - reader responses pour in.

I just had to find out what makes such a simple creation - flour, water, yeast and heat - so captivating. Quickly, my exploration turned into an obsession. Now, I simply had to find the best.

In the last month, I've sampled more pizzas than I can count. I've eaten pizza at Chez Panisse Cafe, where Alice Waters started the gourmet pizza trend in 1981 and since then has installed three different ovens to try to produce the crust of her dreams.

I've flown to New York to consult with Anthony Mangieri, whose Una Pizza Napoletana in the East Village is considered a mecca for Neapolitan connoisseurs. Finally, I hopped on a plane to Phoenix to find out firsthand whether Pizzeria Bianco offers the best pizza in America, as many connoisseurs claim.

Whether good, bad or mediocre, everyone loves it - children and adults alike. Last year, American Heritage magazine reported that 93 percent of Americans copped to eating pizza in the last month. Annual per capita consumption is a whopping 23 pounds per person.

"Even the worst pizza is still melted cheese on warm bread," says Ed Levine, the author of "Pizza: A Slice of Heaven" (Universe Publishing, \$24.96). "How bad can melted cheese on warm bread be?"

Yet, great pizza is rare; its simplicity belies its complexity. It seems that straightening the leaning tower of Pisa would be easier than making an exceptional pizza. All the pizza masters I've talked to - and none of them would call themselves such - say that perfection is fleeting.

Despite his fanatical striving, New York's Mangieri says he's happy with about only 10 percent of the product he produces. This is from a guy so obsessed that when I interviewed him in

New York, he was covered in construction dust from ripping out his storefront to install yet another new oven, this one from Naples.

He's only 36 years old, but has already commissioned or built four ovens since he made his first pizza at age 18.

"We only make four toppings here, and believe me, we're still stressed out about things," he says.

His pantry is limited to San Marzano tomatoes, extra virgin olive oil, garlic, oregano, basil, buffalo mozzarella and sea salt.

That's it. No additions. No takeout. He makes 100 pizzas a day, beginning at 5 p.m. When the dough is all gone, he turns out the lights.

"This is what I do, and this is the way we're going to do it," he says. Tattoos snake up both arms and peek out above the collar of his T-shirt. He's opinionated, passionate, soft-spoken, contemplative and quick to dismiss the idea that there's artistry in what he does.

"This is manual labor," he says. "We could be digging ditches or making pizza." But a ditch digger doesn't have to deal with the stress of 20 customers waiting in line when the dough is misbehaving and the oven is too hot.

Mangieri tries to maintain the temperature at around 1,000 degrees so the pizza cooks in 90 seconds. But both the fire and the dough have minds of their own. The dough can react

differently to the environment from night to night, and one too many logs on the fire and Mangieri will have burned pizza for the next two hours.

It's so stressful and labor-intensive that he's only open four days a week. He puts in a minimum 12-hour day; when the oven is blazing, customers can be sure he's in front of it. He works two of his three "days off" - there's always something to be done and, besides, the dough takes 48 hours to finish.

Mangieri continually strives to make the perfect pizza, not for others but for himself. "Everything I do is because of my own motivation," he says.

Still, it wounds him when people complain that he charges \$21 for his 12-inch pie. "It hurts me, because they act as if I'm trying to get something over on them. I wish I had the nerve to charge \$50, because that's what it's worth."

Mangieri's ideal pizza is tender and wet, with just a hint of crispness and some blackened blisters that give it a smoky undercurrent. In his opinion, pizza should be eaten with a knife and fork, or folded in quarters. Timing is important in both the baking and eating: It must be consumed within about 5 minutes of being produced.

Other pizzaiolos I talked to find perfection just as elusive.

"We're chasing something that's a slippery slope," says Chris Bianco, 45, of Pizzeria Bianco in Phoenix. He's been making pizza for nearly 20 years.

Mangieri and Bianco are kindred spirits; it should come as no surprise that they talk regularly. They have similar philosophy, commitment and passion.

"We think we've mastered the thing, and we don't know a thing," he says. Bianco peppers his speech with philosophical quips that reveal an almost mystical relationship between pizza and life.

"Pizza is like snowflakes. There's no two that look the same. At some moment, there's a line of perfection and you're there for it," he says.

Like Mangieri, he personally produces every pizza - he hasn't missed a day of work in seven years - and crafts anywhere from 200 to 265 a night. His menu consists of six variations, plus a couple antipasti and salads.

The toppings, applied judiciously, include the traditional margherita with tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella that melts like butter, and basil; and his favorite "non-traditional" mix of red onions, Parmigiano-Reggiano, rosemary and pistachios.

The combinations are carefully chosen to bolster rather than smother the flavor of the puffy, blistered crust. Probably the most popular, and his least favorite, is called the Wiseguy, with wood-roasted onions, house-smoked mozzarella and fennel sausage.

Every day before 4 p.m., customers start lining up in front of the brick building that began life in 1929 as a machine shop in Heritage Square; by 5 p.m., when the place opens, it looks like

opening night of a Broadway show. The 45 seats are immediately filled; by 5:15 p.m. on a recent Wednesday, there was a 1 1/4-hour wait; by 5:20 p.m. it was up to 2 hours, and by 5:30 p.m. people were willing to wait 2 1/2 hours. His fans are right; the pizza is indeed very special.

In today's environment, where chefs vie for lucrative television contracts, package their own product line and open multiple locations, Bianco is as old-fashioned as the cobbler that once was the cornerstone of Main Street.

Some might think it's boring to do the same thing over and over, continually stretching dough, adding toppings and feeding the pie into the oven, where just 5 minutes turns it puffy, crisp and steaming. Zen-like, he occasionally breaks his rhythm to greet customers or add another pecan log to the fire, causing the flames to shoot across the top of the arched wood oven.

"Doing something repetitive that I'm in a relationship with allows me to love my life in the moment," he explains.

Bianco's parents were artists - his father's paintings hang from the brick wall of his pizzeria as well as in the wine bar next door. He reluctantly admits to an artistic aspect to his creations, but it's fleeting. "In that moment, if all the forces are aligned, something can happen," he says.

To even have a shot at that elusive moment, he controls as many factors as he can. The dough, which generally takes about 18 hours to make, is alive with yeast and is beyond his control, but he can be in command of the ingredients, which is why he has

the flour milled for him and the olive oil specially blended. He's been a pioneer at procuring products close to the source and has won the admiration of the top chefs in the country, many of whom have made pilgrimages to his pizzeria.

Nancy Silverton singles out Bianco as one of her inspirations for Mozza in Los Angeles. Silverton, who founded La Brea Bakery and then sold 80 percent to IAWS Group for a reported \$68.5 million, doesn't have to work another day, but late last year, she opened the pizzeria and the adjacent osteria with New York chef Mario Batali.

"It was kind of an expensive excuse to make the kind of pizza I wanted to eat," she explains. She turned a baker's eye on the crust, making super-wet dough that takes 36 hours to produce and results in that elusive chewy, crisp, puffy crust with little nooks and crannies you find in really great bread.

Silverton offers 15 combinations of toppings, both traditional and creative, such as squash blossoms, burrata and tomato; or Gorgonzola dolce, fingerling potatoes, radicchio and rosemary. They're sparingly applied and designed to create harmony with the crust.

To produce the crust, which is persnickety under the best conditions, she makes two batches of dough each day, but says the best pizza comes out of her oven around 3 p.m., the time when she feels the dough is at

its best. That happened to be the time I was biting into her creation and finally understood what great pizza was all about.

Although Silverton's an experienced baker, she's humbled by pizza. "You have a great pizza and you're lucky," she says. "You come a week later and it's not that great."