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Pizza Goes Gourmet

Although still inundated with large chains and take-out operations, the pizza category has experienced a resurgence by restaurants offering authentic Italian pies and upscale ingredients.

By Lisa White, Contributing Editor -- *Foodservice Equipment and Supplies*, 7/1/2008

When Italian immigrants brought their pizza recipes to the United States in the late 19th century, they most likely did not envision the many formats these pies would adopt over the years.

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Chicago's famed stuffed pizza, with its thick dough crust and mountains of mozzarella, bears little resemblance to the rectangular, thin-crust creations produced in Italy. The same applies to the Italian pizza's traditional olive oil, tomato and basil topping, which is a big departure from the varied ingredients used in American-style pizzas.

Chicago-based research group Technomic reports that pizza is the second-largest limited-service restaurant category, behind hamburgers. In 2007, U.S. sales in this segment totaled close to \$29 billion and are projected to increase to more than \$33 billion by 2012.

Technomic's "Pizza Consumer Trend Report" found more consumers turning toward pizza on the weekends, vs. the weeknights, as an economical option to dining out.

Although chains Pizza Hut, Domino's Pizza and Papa John's make up more than a third of limited-service pizza sales, according to Technomic, full-service restaurants in this segment continue to become more prevalent.

Many independents take their cues from the chains, which keep the category fresh by offering new and limited-time-only pizzas, reports Technomic.

In some of today's hottest restaurants, pizza is becoming retro, going back to its roots with thinner crusts and more simple ingredients.

Naples' Finest

When Joe Fugere had a vision of creating an authentic Neapolitan pizzeria in the Seattle area, he wanted to get it right.

So before opening Tutta Bella in January 2004, Fugere traveled to Italy and became a certified pizzaiolo. He then continued his training, refined his skills and created an operation that serves authentic Neapolitan pizzas certified by the VPN or Verace Pizza Napoletana Association.

The governing agency in Italy that gives certification for pizza by following certain standards, VPN does not require authentic Neapolitan pizza to be made in Italy. Only a handful of restaurants in the United States are certified by the VPN, due to the association's strict requirements.

The VPN mandates that pizzas be cooked in a wood-fired dome oven operating at 800°F. for no longer than 90 seconds; only fresh, all-natural and non-processed ingredients be used; and dough be kneaded either by hand or using a low-speed mixer. Mechanical dough shaping is forbidden.

Tutta Bella Neapolitan Pizzeria was the first restaurant in the Northwest to receive VPN certification, according to the restaurant's executive chef, Brian Gojdics. "Pizza in Naples is intertwined in daily life. The culture is so immersed into pizza, and the VPN protects this," he says.

Over the past three years, the Seattle area has seen a pizza rebirth. "There are not many pizzerias in Seattle, but from the small amount of growth in this category, we are seeing more interest in authentic ingredients, like fresh mozzarella, and smaller sizes," Gojdics says.

The first Tutta Bella opened in Washington's Columbia City neighborhood as a 40-seat restaurant with eight employees. In the last five years, the operation has expanded to include two more restaurants in Stone Way and Westlake, with a total of 150 employees. A fourth location is planned for next year. These trendy, funky operations evoke a neighborhood atmosphere.

With the focus on authenticity, the restaurant's menu remains simple. It includes just 12 pizza varieties, four types of salads and a choice of tiramisu or cannoli for dessert.

The namesake Tutta Bella pizza is by far the most popular and includes tomatoes, roasted onions, roasted mushrooms, hot Italian sausage and fresh mozzarella. Gojdics says the most requested combination is the sausage/mushroom pizza. In true Neapolitan fashion, only one size and one crust type are available. "Our pizza is produced with a light, delicate flour, which results in a fluffy crust that has a credit-card thin center and just a hint of a crunch," he says.

Salads include a Caesar with Romaine, Parmigiano Reggiano, house-made focaccia croutons and anchovies; Salerno salad with fresh mozzarella, shaved fennel, cherry tomato halves, cucumbers, basil, Romaine and Dijon balsamic vinaigrette; Naples salad with Genoa salami, fire-roasted chicken breast, pancetta, carrots, artichokes, Romaine, cherry tomatoes, Kalamata olives and crumbled gorgonzola with a blend of Caesar and white balsamic vinaigrette; and a house salad with fresh greens, red onions, white beans, carrots, Kalamata olives and house-roasted red peppers topped with white balsamic vinaigrette.

Gojdics says the limited selections allow him to focus on quality vs. quantity.

To keep things fresh, menu revisions take place once or twice a year. This sometimes does not result in new pizza varieties. "We just finished a menu revision where the focus was on altering our techniques and how items are prepared, rather than on the ingredients," Gojdics says.

Varied ingredients highlight the seasonal specials, although Gojdics says the menu keeps selections fairly regimented. Spring additions include asparagus, wild mushrooms and strawberries. Steak pizza is a popular item in late summer.

All ingredients are fresh, which means staff typically fill walk-ins with prepped goods by noon and empty these spaces by 10 p.m. each day. The restaurant does a significant enough volume to receive produce orders on a regular basis. According to Gojdics, no ingredients are in the walk-in for more than two days at a time.

Because the restaurants reside in pre-existing buildings, the size of Tutta Bella's kitchens tends to vary, using similar equipment and layout.

Columbia City and Westlake kitchens average about 400-square-feet, while Stone Way's is 800-square-feet. All three are open kitchens situated in the center of the restaurant, with the focus on the wood-burning pizza ovens.

"Our kitchens are designed around these ovens. They are the centerpiece," Gojdics says. Stone Way has two ovens, while the other locations have one. These units serve double duty by not only cooking the pizzas, but also roasting the vegetables and handling about 75 percent of the prep work.

The remaining prep duties are handled by two mixers imported from Portugal, one with a hook to mix the dough and the other with a whip to produce the desserts and espresso toppings, along with slicers. Tutta Bella uses walk-ins and undercounter refrigeration to store perishable ingredients.

The limited menu and stringent preparation guidelines for its pizzas do not account for the only challenges Gojdics faces. The ever-changing Pacific Northwest weather created consistency issues that needed to be overcome. "Because dough is made with yeast, which is a living organism that reacts to weather, we really have to pay attention to the climate changes to gauge the dough's reaction," he explains.

After five years, Gojdics has it down pat, but indoctrinating Tutta Bella's other chefs takes time. "Getting others to understand this process takes a year's worth of weather changes," he says.

A personal challenge is the restrictions of the limited menu on Gojdics' creativity. "Although I don't make changes on a daily basis, I've learned to unleash my ideas with our specials and during our monthly wine dinners," he says.

Upscale Pies

At Chicago's A Mano restaurant, upscale pizza shares the menu with gourmet fare, including Pino Nero braised rabbit gnocchi, pan-seared Alaskan halibut and Berkshire pork Milanese.

Chef John Caputo concurs that the trend has been geared more toward better quality pizza, including Neapolitan and organic.

A Mano focuses on using natural and organic ingredients to prepare dishes from scratch. The restaurant, which opened in November of 2007, has 120 seats. Pizzas occupy a space on the lunch and dinner menus.

The menu revolves around seasonal products and changes at least quarterly. It consists of "Specials," "Antipasti and Salumi," "Raw Fish," "Pizza," "First Plates," "Pasta," "Second Plates" and "Sides."

Recent pizza varieties included a traditional margherita with tomatoes, basic and organic mozzarella; roasted clams, garlic confit puree, parsley and capers; fennel sausage with fingerling potatoes and arugula; a wild mushroom and caramelized onion pizza with white truffle oil, taleggio cheese, hazelnuts and oregano; and a prosciutto di Parma pizza with arugula and mozzarella.

The 9,000-square-foot restaurant has a 1,500-square-foot kitchen located in the middle of the dining room and surrounded by windows on three sides. "The restaurant wraps around the entire kitchen, with the cook and prep lines facing the customers. It lets our diners feel like they are in the kitchen," Caputo says.

The cookline includes a wood-burning pizza oven; rotisserie; two graduated flat tops; ranges with convection ovens; a salamander; pasta cooker; low boy for stockpots; and an old-fashioned hand-cranked slicer with a fly wheel for salumi.

The storage areas, including four new walk-ins totaling 800-square-feet, also are utilized by A Mano's sister restaurant Bin 26, which is located upstairs.

Caputo says the biggest challenge is finding high-quality products on a consistent basis. "We are not a tiny 60-seat restaurant, so this is an ongoing battle," he says. The restaurant requires daily food delivery.

Working with hand-built wood-burning ovens, as opposed to prefabricated units, also can present a number of issues. Caputo has been perfecting his dough recipes over the last three years at Bin Wine Café, a small, 3,000-square-foot restaurant in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood. "All of my wood-burning ovens are built by a gentleman who studied oven-building in Italy. I've discovered that each oven has its own personality," he says.

The crust Caputo created in Bin Wine Café's smaller oven was acceptable, but did not quite meet his expectations. "When A Mano's new oven was built, it perfected my dough recipe," he says.

Due to a lack of space, Bin Wine Café can only accommodate a residential-type oven that holds three pies. Because of its size, every pizza sits right next to the heat source. The larger oven at A Mano can accommodate 10 pies at one time, so not every pizza sits by the fire. "This creates a more even and balanced heat flow around the pie. The result is a more consistent and better quality product," Caputo says.

Organic & Original

Although still under construction in Sacramento at press time, Hot Italian Pizza & Panini is a new concept focusing on pizza and the popular panini sandwiches. Dubbed a European-style paninoteca, its opening is scheduled for this month.

This concept was created by Andrea Lepore, a sports and restaurant marketing specialist, and Fabrizio Cercatore, an Italian restaurant operator who will serve as executive chef.

"Independent restaurants are putting so many gourmet spins on pizza today," Lepore says, adding that many are electing to use organic ingredients and focusing on local sourcing. "It's pretty market-driven."

What distinguishes Hot Italian from other pizza operations is that the restaurant is one of the first participating in a pilot program offered by the U.S. Green Building Council to help retail stores and restaurants obtain LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification.

This operation's environmentally friendly attributes include solar panels that will heat water in the dishwasher and bathrooms, a commercial composting bin designated for kitchen food waste and the use of recycled building materials.

The 3,500-square-foot, 110-seat restaurant's location in one of the country's greenest cities is expected to be beneficial, given that its focus is on sustainability. "We are fortunate, being in California, that we can go to local sources for produce, wine and meats," Lepore says, adding that the point is not to beat organic over everyone's head. "We think, at some point, everything will be organic and free-range."

Still, with the rising prices of flour and cheese, cost will be a big factor. Despite this challenge, Lepore says operating a green restaurant is the right thing to do. "People shouldn't have to choose between buying unhealthy, less expensive items and buying more expensive organic products," she says.

This pizza and panini bar concept will target customers who want to grab a quick lunch or hang out in an Italian atmosphere drinking wine. The design features a large main bar as the space's focal point, which provides customers with an unobstructed view of the chef at work.

Those set on pasta are out of luck here. Like Tutta Bella, the menu is simple, offering only pizza and panini sandwiches as entrées.

Hot Italian's pizzas are named after well-known Italians, including soccer player Luca Toni, whose pizza includes mozzarella, prosciutto cotto and fresh ricotta; and rugby star Marco Bartolami's pizza with mozzarella, gorgonzola, pear and honey.

A symbol on the menu designates which pizzas can be made as paninis, since many offer the same choice of ingredients.

Hot Italian's cookline will consist of a wood-burning oven imported from Italy. Beverage equipment includes undercounter refrigerators, beer dispensers, an espresso bar, a back bar, a unit holding wine and beer, a gelato and espresso bar that includes a gelato case with 18 trays, and a four-door wine refrigeration unit for white wine and beer.

The pizza bar prep area includes a prep table and undercounter refrigeration. The 500-square-foot back kitchen contains a grill, range and three refrigerators. "We didn't go the walk-in route because of space limitations," Lepore says.

Hot Italian's location also will feature a 2,500-square-foot shop with Italian sportswear, cyclist and scooter enthusiast accessories, soccer items and urban-inspired Italian goods, in addition to a Vespa showroom. "Combining the three concepts will have a symbiotic relationship, creating a unique environment and the perfect definition of a flagship location," Lepore says.

Key E&S for Pizza

- Wood-burning oven
- Prep table
- Slicer
- Mixer
- Walk-ins
- Beverageequipment

E&S Considerations

Space: Because wood-burning pizza ovens take up considerable space, many pizza operations plan the kitchens around these units.

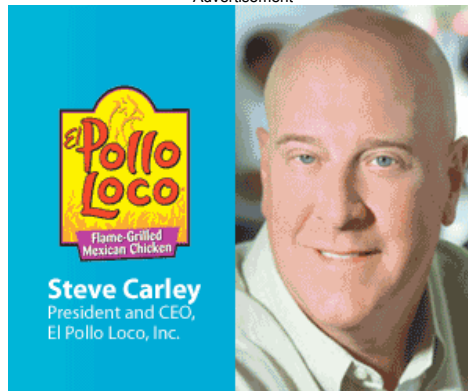
Consistency: Cooking pizza consistently, especially in a wood-burning oven, can be challenging. All of the variables must be the same each time to accomplish uniform cooking and results.

Flexibility: Many upscale pizza operations offer other dishes, from pasta to fish, so equipment must be able to handle multiple items effectively.

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The advertisement features a blue background. On the left is the El Pollo Loco logo, which includes a stylized chicken head and the text "El Pollo Loco" in a yellow font, with "Flame-Grilled Mexican Chicken" written below it. To the right of the logo is a portrait of Steve Carley, a bald man with a friendly expression, wearing a light-colored shirt. Below the logo and portrait, the text "Steve Carley" is written in white, followed by "President and CEO, El Pollo Loco, Inc." in a smaller white font.