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Dining: In midtown Sacramento, Hot Italian's pizza matches its high style

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There is a lot of folklore, hype and posturing about pizza. In other words, we get plenty of good information and plenty of nonsense.

New York-style pizza or the pizza of Naples, we are told, is supposed to be defined by simplicity. It must bake in an oven of 800 degrees, maybe higher, and the thin-crust pies should cook in under three minutes. And yes, there should be distinctive char markings on the outer crust, though nobody really can explain how that makes it better.

The oven must be brick, and it should be fueled with wood or, if you look at the legendary New York pizzerias, sometimes coal.

These are the things argued and talked about endlessly by so-called pizza aficionados, as if the components themselves are all that really matter. I assume it makes people feel good to think they know what they are talking about, to adhere to these details like some kind of religion.

But it's wrong to do so. Wrong and silly and sad.

Good pizza – *great* pizza – simply has to taste very, very good, with flavors that work together, and a chew both formidable and supple. A great pizza alerts you to its greatness with aroma that rises from the table.

Great pizza must have a superior crust, which cannot be hurried or manipulated or mass-produced. Such a crust uses three or four simple ingredients, a healthy amount of kneading and plenty of time to rest and rise and retard and ferment, all of which build flavor, strength and texture.

Though there are plenty of mediocre crusts that are too bland or too brittle or too dry or too doughy, a perfect crust can only be so good. It cannot achieve the mythic.

Sacramento has recently enjoyed a renaissance of artisan pizza. Among the best are at Masullo, OneSpeed, Roma and Spataro, with Zelda's still appealing to its deep-dish niche. I'm also not ashamed to love the big, basic and delicious offerings by the slice at Pieces on 21st Street.

But the greatness I'm talking about is on display seven days and nights a week in a sleek, stylish, oh-so-Italian black and white and green all over building at 16th and Q streets.

When you bite into a Hot Italian pizza, whether it's the \$10 Cannavaro, featuring nothing more than tomato sauce, mozzarella and basil, or the \$17 Stella, with prosciutto parma, mozzarella, crescenza cheese, mushrooms and, yes, an egg in the center that cooks in the oven, you can rest assured you are tasting some of the best pizza around.

And I'm not talking around town. I'm talking coast to coast, from Patsy's in Manhattan and Grimaldi's in Brooklyn to Pizzeria Delfina in San Francisco, with a pit stop at Bianco's in Phoenix, where people wait two hours or more to eat that pizza, made by a trash-talking Brooklyn transplant.

The pizza at Hot Italian is the work of Fabrizio Cercatore, who also has a large full-fare restaurant in Italy.

It would be tempting to conclude that Cercatore is actually *the* "hot Italian." He has a big smile and plenty of physicality. He is constantly engaged in what he is doing, spinning and twirling the dough, sneaking a peek into the wood-burning oven – intense, alive, charismatic. He is a master pizzamaker, but he also understands that going out to eat should be entertaining, that he is part of the performance.

Hot Italian also has some excellent servers who bring knowledge, energy and presence to the floor. Three I have spotted with that special something are Ali, Igor and Chloe.

Out front, Hot Italian is managed by the smooth and personable Nicola Riviuccio, former co-owner and general manager of the acclaimed but short-lived Masque Ristorante in El Dorado Hills.

Bringing the pieces together is Andrea Lepore, who spent a decade doing public relations for the Sacramento Kings and Monarchs basketball teams. Hot Italian is her vision. And frankly, I don't think I have seen as many good ideas and creative energy in one place as I have seen at Hot Italian.

The restaurant business is competitive, and Lepore simply out-plans and out-imagines the competition. She was the one who persuaded Cercatore to change his life and come to Sacramento. She was smart enough to bring in Riviuccio to give Hot Italian instant credibility and polish.

She saw the potential of making this renovated space a LEED-certified green building, meaning the materials, the energy use, the design and even the nontoxic paint on the walls are forward-thinking, environmentally appropriate and healthy.

As a proponent of good design and what it can mean to a city, I could go on and on about Hot Italian: the simple pendant lights made of Illy coffee cans; the refurbished espresso machine from the 1960s; the stools at the gelato bar made of bicycle wheel rims; the monstrous ceiling fan purchased from, yes, BigAssFans.com; the supersonic Dyson Airblade hand driers that make visits to the restroom – and washing your hands – an essential part of the experience; the communal tables; the beautiful white-tiled pizza oven; the simplicity of the black and white decorating palette; the sculptural bike racks out front that are the first of their kind in the nation; the soaring mural out front painted by a graffiti artist to the delight of a Second Saturday throng.

Hot Italian is many things but primarily a pizzeria. All the style and the retail component may have led some to think this was all flash, no substance. Not so.

There are about 15 pizzas on the menu, though some change with the seasons. One of the best pizzas I've had was the heirloom tomato pizza in late summer. Another was the puréed pumpkin pizza in the fall. These are not gimmicky, new-age pizzas. They use good ingredients with good technique to produce clean, crisp traditional flavors.

Among the regular pizzas on the menu, costing \$10 to \$17, you could take your pick and be happy with any of them. The aforementioned Stella is a must-try for the egg experience alone. The spicy sausage of the Bellucci is superb. So is the Bova, which has roasted eggplant and goat cheese.

But if you really want to do a pizza taste test, you need to pare it down to its basics. If a great dough is made with little more than flour, water, yeast and salt, the best pizzas need nothing but cheese, tomato sauce and a leaf or two of basil. For an extra treat, try putting a little spicy oil on top.

Many of the pizzas are also available as panini. Big and thick and rustic, they are the only ones around not pressed to death with a George Foreman-style grill, thank goodness. For dessert, there is a large selection of quality gelato and very satisfying espresso.

The wine list embraces Italy, with very good vino by the glass, mostly \$5 to \$8, or by the bottle for \$20 to \$48. The Sangiovese by Coltibuono is the most recent red I have enjoyed there. The wine is served in juice glasses with rather thick rims, which makes one think of an Italian picnic. It's a cool idea, and unpretentious to boot, though it's not my preference for enjoying wine.

But the heart of Hot Italian is what comes out of that piping hot oven. With so much creativity and good design in one place, it would be easy to take your eye off the real reason this place will thrive – the greatness of its pizza.

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HOT ITALIAN

1627 16th St., Sacramento

(916) 444-3000

www.HotItalian.net

Hours: 11:30 a.m. until late night, daily

Reservations: Not necessary except for large groups (15 or more).

Vegetarian-friendly? Yes

Full bar? Beer and wine only but expected to expand to full bar soon

Overall: **3 1/2 stars** (very good)

This is a wonderful example of a new place with excellent food, great design and plenty of creative ideas. It should only get better.

Food: **4 stars** (excellent)

Short and simple, I have not had better pizza. This is Italian-style or Neapolitan, 13-inch pizzas baked in a wood-burning oven.

Service: **3 stars** (good)

Getting the right people for a new restaurant is not easy. But Hot Italian has some excellent servers and some who might be one day.

Ambience: **4 stars** (excellent)

I've heard some complain they don't like the black-and-white color scheme. But this is different from every other place in town – modern, sleek and cool, with so many great ideas at a single address.

Value: **3 stars** (good)

Pizza is usually a pretty good deal. For the quality of the food and atmosphere, you should be happy with your bill. Wines are reasonable and of good quality.

Noteworthy: This is the second new pizza place I have reviewed with a bike theme, the other being OneSpeed. Hot Italian has very cool bike racks, and I encourage you to walk, ride or scoot here for a meal if it's within reason.

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