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In Dallas, a passion for pizza

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Pizza is happening in and around Dallas, and I'm not talking those cheap, cheesy manhole covers. No, the pizza that's all the buzz echoes the kind of pizza you find in Italy, with lots of attention to the crust and the keep-it-simple approach to toppings — terrific handmade mozzarella, the best tomatoes, only fresh basil and no dried oregano.

Pizzaiolo Jay Jerrier leads the pack with Cane Rosso, which opened to instant crowds in Deep Ellum in February. Its blazing wood-fired oven cooks each pizza in 90 seconds, and getting just the right char without burning the pie takes a nimble hand.

In Plano, chef Jamie Samford cures his own bacon and rhapsodizes over the pizza oven's pecan wood at Zanata, a new outpost of the Rockwall spot that built its reputation on pizza. Irving's Cavalli Pizzeria Napoletana is now making its vaunted pies at a second location in McKinney, and mobile pizza ovens are charging through the party circuit.

Meanwhile, Dallas' pizza cognoscenti are licking their chops in anticipation of the arrival of Dough, San Antonio's acclaimed pizzeria, which its owners plan to open soon at Preston Road and Forest Lane.

This is a pizza moment like we've never seen in Dallas.

Neapolitan-style pies are big. Pizzaioli in Naples, Italy, guard their heritage so fiercely that they started the Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana to set the standard for "true" (*verace)* Neapolitan pies around the world. True Neapolitan pizzas must be made with hand-thrown dough using special flour (Italian 00 grade, the most finely milled), canned Italian San Marzano tomatoes, extra-virgin olive oil, fresh basil and specific types of mozzarella (buffalo milk or fior di latte) before being fired in a super-hot wood-burning oven.

The Italian government granted the AVPN the power to certify pizzerias in 1984. Only about 350 worldwide have earned the coveted AVPN credentials.

Texas has three: Cane Rosso, Cavalli and Dough. That's a pizza home run for Dallas.

At its most basic, this formula produces a pizza with a spectacular, tell-tale white crust, thin and intermittently charred, and topped with crushed, not cooked, tomatoes; dots, not huge globs, of milky, chewy mozzarella; scatterings of basil; and a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil. If the middle seems floppy, that's so you can roll it up and eat it Italian style.

But that's just a starting point for some Dallas chefs. Not content to adhere to the rules, Nonna chef-owner Julian Barsotti, who was certified by the AVPN, rejected its constraints in pursuit of a pizza he likes even better. To that end, he conducted with his staff a blind tasting of California vs. Italian tomatoes. California won, and that's what he uses on his pizza. He tweaks the dough, too (AVPN rules allow only 00 flour, water, salt and yeast). So does Urban Crust chef-partner Salvatore Gisellu, adding extra-virgin olive oil for a crisper crust.

Good wood-fired pizza isn't exactly new in Dallas. Gisellu was throwing pies at Arcodoro back in the early '90s, and people loved them. But the place that really got Dallas thinking differently about pizza was Tristan Simon's Fireside Pies, which opened on Henderson Avenue eight years ago and made a big deal of bringing in a pastry chef to formulate the dough. It didn't hurt that Nick Badovinus was the chef. But these were still relatively "loaded" pies.

Campania in West Village, where Jerrier was a partner, gave Dallas its first whiff of Neapolitan-style pizza in 2005, albeit without the wood-burning oven. Jerrier trotted out his wacky mobile pizza oven in 2006 and eventually left Campania, which has since gone more mainstream. Jerrier's pizzas still struck people as weird — skimpy toppings by local standards, fresh mozzarella, blistered crust — but he persevered and won folks over to the Neapolitan way.

In 2007, Charlie Green made a splash with his Neopolitan-style pies when he opened Olivella's in University Park.

It helped that more Dallasites were traveling to Italy and coming home craving real Italian pizza. Artisanal pies were hot on the East and West coasts and, crazy as it sounds, the economic downturn was a plus. What glorious pizza could be had for so much less than a full-blown, multicourse dinner. The pizza fit right in with the farm-to-table movement, too.

"It is the perfect canvas," Dough owner Doug Horn wrote in an email, "to show off fantastic local products as well as the authentic ingredients of pizza Napoletana."

A ferociously hot oven is part of the AVPN formula: Pizzas must be cooked in a wood-burning oven that reaches temperatures of at least 800 degrees Fahrenheit. "I like my oven violently hot," says Jerrier, who studied in 2006 at Antica Pizzeria, a nondescript restaurant in Marina Del Ray, Calif., that serves as the U.S. AVPN-certifying facility. "I want to see blisters on the pizza. The char is a critical component." It imparts a certain bitterness, adding complexity.

And if you're thinking "How hard can it be to cook a pizza?" Jerrier, who makes his dough and mozzarella daily, will tell you this: It's much easier to turn down the heat so you merely brown the crust without blistering — something Jerrier would never do. It's also easier to purchase mozzarella, to use cheaper domestic flour and

tomatoes and to just lard on toppings, an almost reflexive response to consumer demand for “as giant a pizza as possible for as little as possible.” The superb mozzarella Jerrier makes is the fior di latte, or “flower of milk,” type approved by the AVPN; it’s made with cows’ milk.

When you get to this level of pizza making, everything-you-can-pile-on pies disappear, and most of these dedicated pizzerias feature fewer combinations. Urban Crust’s menu advises no more than three toppings for “the crispiest, authentic Italian taste.”

At Nonna, Barsotti changes the Roman-style pizza offerings frequently. He topped one recently with house-made fennel salame, caciocavallo (lightly smoked mozzarella), tomato and garlic confit; a white pizza with Cherrystone clams, sweet onions and fresh herbs is usually on the menu. With amazing char on the crust, made with the Italian 00 flour, water, yeast and salt. “But I add semolina,” he says. Nonna can be a bit pricey as restaurants go, but you can sit at the bar and have a great pizza and glass of wine without dropping a fortune.

Zanata eschews Italian trappings for American-made ingredients, such as Lancelot King Arthur high-gluten flour “with a touch of honey for sweetness and crispness,” says Samford. Most of Zanata’s cured meats come from Fra’ Mani, acclaimed chef Paul Bertolli’s Berkeley salumeria, but Samford cures the bacon in-house for his Fruit and Pig pizza, with goat cheese, golden raisins and arugula.

Its sweet-salty-tangy profile is similar to the Urban Amore pizza you get a few doors down at Urban Crust. Gisellu originally called his — topped with goat cheese, mascarpone, fig jam and prosciutto di Parma — “Sex on a Crust.” (It comes close.)

It’s hard to overestimate the influence of Italian pizza (as opposed to New York, say, or Chicago-style pizza) on Dallas’ artisanal pizza trend. Jerrier’s career as a pizzaiolo was inspired by the pizza he fell in love with in Sorrento on his honeymoon, but a local pizzeria cemented the move. “Part of the reason I got into this is because of Fireside Pies on Henderson,” he says. “It was the closest thing we had in Dallas to what we had in Italy.”

Where to find serious, handcrafted pizza

Here’s where the serious Dallas-area pizzaioli are practicing their craft:

CANE ROSSO Currently Dallas’ top dog (*cane*) with fabulously good, Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana-certified pizza. Check website for hours. Free parking in the lot at 2629 Commerce.

2612 Commerce St. at U.S. 75, Dallas. 214-741-1188. www.ilcanerosso.com.

CAVALLI PIZZERIA NAPOLETANA A beacon of AVPN-certified, Italian-style pizza, unafraid to blister the crust. Paolo and Clara Cavalli opened their first pizzeria in Irving, then added a full Italian restaurant in McKinney.

3601 Regent Blvd. (off Belt Line Road), Irving. 972-915-0001. 6851 Virginia Parkway (in the Adriatica mixed-use development at Stonebridge Drive), McKinney. 972-540-1449. www.cavallipizza.com.

FIRESIDE PIES These pizzas have a bready rim that contrasts with the thin inner crust, and each location does things a little differently. The most trend- forward pizzas are found at the Fort Worth location, where lamb sausage, pork sausage and pancetta are made in-house, and one pizza is topped with an egg.

2820 N. Henderson Ave. at Milam Street, Dallas. 214-370-3916. 2949 Crockett St. (West 7th development), Fort Worth. 817-769-3590. See website for more locations. www.firesidepies.com.

NONNA Chef-owner Julian Barsotti always has several pizzas on his ever-changing menu. This is an upscale restaurant, but you can sit at the bar and order a pizza and a glass of wine. Closed for lunch except on Fridays.

4115 Lomo Alto Drive at Lemmon Avenue, Dallas. 214-521-1800. www.nonnadallas.com.

OLIVELLA’S A tiny, parking-impaired spot near Southern Methodist University that still serves great Neapolitan-style pies. Owner Charlie Green opened a second pizzeria in Victory Park last year, but its pizzas have not impressed as much.

3406 McFarlin Blvd. at Hillcrest Avenue, Dallas. 214-528-7070. www.olivellas.com.

URBAN CRUST Excellent Neapolitan-style pizza with aggressive bottom char, in old downtown Plano. One topped with eggplant, Texas goat cheese, pesto and arugula is popular with vegetarians.

1006 E. 15th St. (between Avenues J and K), Plano. 972-509-1400. www.urbancrust.com.

ZANATA More of a restaurant than a pizzeria, the new location serves top-notch Neapolitan-style pies with slightly thicker crust and more generously applied toppings.

1022 E. 15th St. (between Avenues J and K), Plano. 972-422-9999. Also in Rockwall, 202 E. Rusk St. 972-722-2822. www.zanatas.com.

Neopolitan pizza on the go

It’s becoming increasingly popular to bring Neapolitan pizzas to your home or get-together, fired on the spot in mobile wood-fired pizza ovens.

Jay Jerrier started out with a trailer oven in 2006, which helped him perfect his technique before moving into a bricks-and-mortar location. He still rolls out the wheels for private gatherings as well as a regular gig Wednesday nights at Times Ten Cellars in Dallas. Check Cane Rosso’s website (www.ilcanerosso.com) for more information.

Urban Crust in Plano (www.urbancrust.com) added a rolling pizza oven two months ago.

The new kid with a mobile wood- burning oven is Tim “Chef TJ” Flowers, who debuted his mobile unit in January. He’s about where Jerrier was a year ago, working with the wood and the challenges of the char (www.cheftjswoodfiredpizza.com).

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