

The Life of Pie

On the trail of perfect pizza in Naples, Italy

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICIA HARRIS AND DAVID LYON

There's something sublime about the simplicity of pizza in its presumptive birthplace of Naples, Italy. Bad pizza is so rare here that Neapolitans simply pop into the most convenient pizzeria when they're hungry. But when we found ourselves with just a few days in town, we didn't want to settle for merely good pizza when greatness was within our grasp. We sampled the goods at three pizzerias, including two that are close enough together that we could have flung a pie Frisbee-style out the door of one and onto a table at the other.

The white-tiled interior of **L'antica Pizzeria da Michele** (which translates roughly as "Mike's") dates from 1930, but octogenarian proprietor Luigi Condurro says his family's been making pizza since 1870. Da Michele—a name familiar to readers of Elizabeth Gilbert's best-selling memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*—makes pizza for the purist. Tomato sauce, garlic, and oregano top the marinara pizza. The only other choice, the margherita, combines tomato, basil leaves, and fresh mozzarella.

The sheer simplicity of a da Michele pizza focuses attention on the exquisitely thin crust characteristic of Naples pizza. Thanks to the extreme heat of the wood-fired beehive oven, it emerges crisp on the bottom and slightly chewy on top. The tomato sauce tastes like tomatoes. The cheese is deliciously milky, as befits its poetic Italian name, *fior di latte* (flower of milk).

Across the square, **Trionfo da Ciro** (a relative newcomer that opened in 1923) is the larger and more flexible of the dueling pizza masters. It offers a list of toppings that could rival that of an American pizzeria. Diners who deviate from the traditional marinara or margherita usually specify the Quattro Stagioni, or Four Seasons, sprinkled with tomato, mozzarella, olives, mushrooms, artichoke hearts, and ham—additional toppings are optional.

Beneath the benevolent visage of St. Anthony—protector against fire and de facto patron of pizza makers—the pizzaioli shape and spin balls of dough, paint them with sauce,

shower them with cheese and other toppings, and slide them onto the brick hearth with a long wooden paddle, or peel. Hardly more than 90 seconds later, they slide the peels back into the flames to retrieve the finished products. When the pizzas reach the table, crispy, insouciant bubbles of crust hang over the edges of plates. Small puddles of cheese swell and pop, venting steam.

Every Neapolitan has his or her own approach to devouring pizza—the businessman in a suit who tucks his tie into his shirt and uses knife and fork, the elegant woman who cuts a wedge and folds it like a book ("libretto" style). Pizza is such a serious matter in Naples that most pizzerias seek certification by the association Verace Pizza Napoletana ("true Neapolitan pizza"). The VPN symbol guarantees authenticity, but we decided that the ultimate test of quality is how thoroughly the pizza commands the diner's attention.

By that standard, a third pizzeria, **Antica Pizzeria del Borgo Orefici** near the Naples docks, might make the city's best pizza. The crust is uniformly perfect, and the sauce is little more than grated fresh tomatoes with a dash of salt. On our last visit, we watched one young woman romance her pizza. She cut a bite, raised it on her fork, and admired it before wrapping her lips around it. Closing her eyes, she chewed slowly, swallowed, and smiled. She worked her way through the entire pizza, locked in a trance of gastronomic bliss induced by the simple alchemy of dough, tomato, cheese, and a sprinkle of intense fresh basil, all properly assembled and kissed by fire.

That's right—the whole pizza. In Naples, nobody shares. 🍕

Cambridge, Massachusetts-based writers Patricia Harris and David Lyon are divided on whether pizza is better with cow's milk or buffalo milk mozzarella.



Tyrrhenian

