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TASTEBOOK

Authentic Neapolitan Pizza. Find one (and learn how to make one for yourself)

MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO (May 3, 2010)



Fred Mortari, "A Mano" co-owner (right) with world-class pizzaiuolo Antonino Esposito (left). Photo by Raker Goldstein & Co., Inc.

"Pizza has morphed into many different varieties in the States. In Naples, it has never changed." Fred Mortari, a co-owner of A Mano in Ridgewood talks about the true Neapolitan pizza he makes. "The revolution in the U.S. now is 'Let's go back to authenticity.'" Plus: a few tips for home cooks who don't want to invest in their own brick oven and aren't as skilled as a certified pizzaiolo ...

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Though cooked up to sell burgers, the old "Have it your way" slogan could just as well apply to the local pizza scene. Deep-dish or thin crust; white or red; piled with pepperoni or pineapple, we can get a slice or a whole pie any way we want.

"Pizza has morphed into many different varieties in the States. In Naples, it has never changed," said Fred Mortari, a co-owner of A Mano in Ridgewood. That's where the Old-World traditions of dough- and cheese-making were first paired with the saucy tomato of the New World back in the 19th century. Today, Naples's pizza makers, or pizzaioli (pizzaiuoli in the local dialect), still fiercely defend their homemade specialty against the goopy, leaden fare that all too often is sold under the same name. "The revolution in the U.S. now is 'Let's go back to authenticity,'" said Mortari.

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Though not a pizzaiolo himself, as a co-owner of **Orlando Food Sales of Maywood**, Mortari imports the **Italian Caputo brand of "oo" flour** and whole peeled **San Marzano tomatoes** that he says are essential to creating authentic Neapolitan pizza. He also occasionally conducts pizza-making demonstrations with his staff of trained pizzaioli at *A Mano* (Italian for "by hand") for audiences comprising grammar school kids to grandparents who are eager to gobble up the culinary lesson he dispenses along with his free samples. "We want your experience to be as if you got on a plane and went to Naples," he said during such a demonstration last week.

The three pillars of authentic Neapolitan pizza, explained Mortari, are ingredients, technique, and equipment—like his twin red-tiled brick ovens, complete with volcanic soil floor, imported from Italy and assembled on site by Italian craftsmen. Resembling infernal igloos, their blackened half-moon openings reveal a glowing interior where blazing logs maintain the temperature at around 900 degrees—hot enough to cook a pizza in just about a minute.

Impossible to generate in a standard oven, such intense heat is one of the keys to authentic pizza flavor and consistency, said Mortari. To approximate the fire of a brick oven, many home cooks bake their pizzas directly on pizza stones (costing about \$40 apiece) set in their ovens. "We sell a lot of them. This area of the country is big on pizza," said Jim Edwards, culinary director at **Chef Central in Paramus**.

One of only three American restaurants certified by both the **Verace Pizza Napoletana** and **Associazione Pizzaioli Napoletani** organizations of Italy (the other two are in Chicago and Denver), *A Mano* makes its pizza dough by dissolving two grams (less than a tenth of an ounce) of fresh cake yeast in a liter of water, then mixing that with 1.6 kilograms (about 3 1/2 lbs.) of "oo" flour, which is very finely milled flour made from "soft" wheat (as opposed to the durum, or "hard" wheat used to make pasta), and 50 grams (about 1.75 oz.) of sea salt. When not kneaded by hand, the dough is formed by a special mixer that approximates hand mixing so the glutens don't heat up, which would make the dough tough.

"The secret is to use little yeast and to let the dough rise a very long time outside of refrigeration. The resting part is very important," said Mortari. At *A Mano*, the dough is left out to rise for five to six hours if being used the same day. If not, it is refrigerated, and then brought back to room temperature before use. The finished product is a silky pillow of dough that won't shrink back when stretched.

Divided into 9-ounce balls, the dough is worked not by rolling and tossing, but by pressing down



In 1889, the Royal Palace in Naples commissioned the pizzaiolo Raffaele Esposito to create a pizza in honor of the visiting Queen Margherita.



Pizza was a popular food in Naples since at least the 19th century



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and outward, so the air bubbles within move to the edge to form the characteristic rim of a well-made pizza. Once the dough is spread wide enough to surround the pizza maker's hand, it is stretched a bit at a time by tugging on the dough with the opposite hand, flipping it over the hand at center, and giving the dough a quarter turn. A final stretching over closed fists, with thumbs down, gets the dough to the 12-inch diameter of a classic Neapolitan pizza.

Since *A Mano's* ovens are so hot, the tomatoes that dress the pizzas there don't have to be precooked. They're just ground in a food mill and seasoned with sea salt and extra-virgin olive oil. The mozzarella that tops the tomatoes is freshly made by hand on premises each day. A touch of basil is added once the pizzas emerge from the oven.



"Naples pizza can't be simpler: It's flour, tomatoes, cheese," concluded Mortari.

**Home cooks who don't want to invest in their own brick oven and aren't as skilled as a certified pizzaiolo might find pizza making a bit more daunting, however. Here are some pointers that can help:**

- \* Always use good-quality fresh or canned tomatoes. Since home ovens don't get as hot as brick ovens, gently cook the tomatoes in olive oil or use a simple tomato sauce. About four ounces of sauce will dress a 12-inch pizza.

- \* Try using freshly made mozzarella, available at many Italian delis and gourmet shops, instead of supermarket brands. Figure on four ounces—cut or snipped into small pieces if it's freshly made, grated if it's not—per 12-inch pizza.

- \* Many cookbooks call for making dough from a mixture of cake flour and all-purpose flour to approximate the consistency of Italian "00" flour. But that product is now readily available in specialty food stores.

- \* It's best to knead the dough by hand. If using a food processor, set it to "low" to avoid heating up the glutens in the flour.

- \* Try starting with someone else's freshly made dough. Many pizzerias and bread makers will sell their raw dough (prices range from about \$2 to \$3 for anywhere from 9 to 32 ounces). Whether you should use it immediately, let it rise at room temperature, or refrigerate it will depend on when it was made, so ask your vendor for advice. The taste and texture will vary according to the flour and technique used to make it, so try dough from different sources until you're happy with the way it handles and tastes.

- \* If you're making your own dough from Italian "00" flour, your oven may never get hot enough for the pale dough it produces to brown properly. You can help it along by adding about an ounce of sugar to the dough, said Mortari. Brushing a little olive oil on edges before baking also will help.

- \* Pizzaioli use a peel—a large wooden or metal paddle—to slide pizza in and out of the oven. If you don't have one, try using a well-floured rimless baking sheet or the bottom of a rimmed baking sheet instead.

- \* If you need a larger surface than the 16 inches typical of most pizza stones, line the rack in the lower third of your oven with unglazed clay tiles. In their book, *Pizza: Any Way You Slice It!* (Broadway Books, 1998), Charles and Michele Scicolone advised rinsing the tiles under cool water, but never with detergent, which can impart a soapy flavor, before use. They also suggested heating them in the oven, then letting them cool to season them before using them for baking. "You do not have to remove a baking stone or tiles from the oven when you bake other foods," they noted.

- \* If you don't want to bother with pizza stones or tiles, you can cook the pizza on an oiled or heavily floured metal baking pan. The dough will take longer to cook, however, so watch it carefully.

- \* Consider grilling your pizza outdoors. Although pizza stones can be used on backyard grills, pizza dough surprisingly holds its shape on a standard grate, provided that the dough does not break apart in cooking—in which case your toppings will drip onto your coals or heating element. When grilling, brush the heated grates with oil before placing the undressed dough on it. Allow the dough to cook for about a minute; then turn it over and top with tomatoes or tomato sauce and mozzarella, drizzle with a tablespoon of olive oil, and continue to grill until the pizza is cooked through and the crust is nicely golden.

Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco is a freelance writer and editor. Her web site is [www.macfusco.com](http://www.macfusco.com).

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