



Borne by the Flame

The magnetism of a wood-fired pizza lies in the juxtaposition—a process so relatively brief, yet rife with pitfalls; an appearance so simple, but rampant with nuance.

“It starts with the oven,” says Chris Bryan, the partner/chef of Liberty Hall Pizza in Lambertville, NJ, the latest to join the renaissance of authentic Neapolitan pizza making. “Ours burns at a fierce 850 degrees, 350 more than normal.”

What that does is bake the crust to perfection: moist and chewy all the way around. It also significantly shrinks the margin for error. Where the conventional-oven pizza bakes between 10 to 15 minutes, the wood-fired kind is in and out in less than two. Great for starved diners, not so much for timid chefs.

Bryan studied—and that is the proper term—at Nomad Pizza Company in Hopewell, NJ, and Philly, one of the leaders of the movement and, by most accounts, still one of its standard-bearers. One of the critical lessons he learned over his four-year apprenticeship was even before you start dividing your night into two-minute intervals, fixate on the dough. That’s what’ll make or break you.

“We rest ours three to five days,” Bryan says. Just enough time for a malty flavor to develop. The older the dough, too, the more of those charred blisters that’ll pock the crust, every one of them a hit of smokiness that conventional oven-baked pies can only envy.

Anything that doesn’t play up the pie’s depth is a threat. This is not Pizza Hut deep-dish created expressly to be buried under eight different kinds of meat. Two, three ingredients, tops. All of them of the same artisanal quality as the dough: Calabrian sausage, local mozzarella from pasture-fed cows, farm-fresh heirloom tomatoes.

We’ll consider anchovies, too, at Bryan’s advice. “We found these clean, delicious ones from Sicily that aren’t at all fishy,” he says. “People say they hate them then try ours, and it’s the best pizza they’ve ever had.” —MIKE MADAIO

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