

ALLEROS

VIA GRA

NATURALE

€ 5,00





L'antica Pizzeria "da Michele"

PIZZERIA
da MIGHELE

VIA
CESARE SERVALE
N. 40/A, PERINO

PIZZERIA
DA MICHELE







July 27, 2008-

NAPLES, ITALY----Steamy tomato sauce flowed off pizza pies like lava from Mount Vesuvius. The cow-milk cheese at L'Antica Pizzeria Da Michele carried a nurturing flavor. The crust was as thin as a wedding veil.

Hey, I'm not the first person to equate Neapolitan pizza with a love affair. Pizzeria Da Michele in Naples is regarded as the best pizza spot in the world. Elizabeth Gilbert said so in her best-seller *Eat, Pray, Love*. Gilbert broke up with someone and then traveled to southern Italy, India and Bali. She had a bite of Da Michele pizza and wound up describing her perfect rebound guy: "Thin, doughy, strong, gummy, yummy, chewy, salty pizza paradise."

As a wanderlusted Chicagoan I had to try this pizza. And Riccardo Muti, the new music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is from Naples. He likes pizza, too.

Da Michele is a storefront operation with twin dining rooms. The restaurant seats only 64 at small marble tables. Lines can run as long as two hours. I waited about 45 minutes on a midday Saturday. The hectic atmosphere of Da Michele reminded me of Mario's Restaurant in the Bronx or La Scarola, my favorite tiny Italian restaurant in Chicago.

There are two basic pie options at Da Michele: margherita (mozzarella, basil, tomato sauce) and marinara (tomato, garlic and oregano, no cheese). Neapolitans don't believe in jazzing up their pizzas with unnecessary ingredients.

Through translator Mario Aruta, owner Luigi Condurro said the current Da Michele opened in 1930. Condurro is 86 years old and still makes pizzas on the morning shift.

A delicate balance of ingredients is what makes the pizza click. One secret is fiordilatte, not from Italy's popular buffalo milk, but cow milk. "It comes from Agerola along the hilly southern Amalfi Coast," Condurro said in a whisper. "It is not buffalo mozzarella, which is too milky. Pizza making seems like the easiest thing to do, but it is work. You need a soft dough because that is easy to digest. Another secret is to do the dough the day

before. We make it at three in the afternoon and use it the next day. It is natural growing."

Just like a solid relationship.

The Da Michele pizza is a messier proposition than thin-sliced American pizza. Napkins are a must across your lap. The pizza is not served in slices, although I did take a knife to the pie like a blade to grass. The crust is burnt black. Coalfire Pizza in Chicago has a better, puffier Neapolitan crust.

Condurro is a fifth generation pizza maker. Salvatore Condurro began making family pizza in 1870, but in 1906 his son Michele (Condurro's father) opened a small counter for pizza vendors across the street from the current location. A sepia-toned portrait of Michele hangs in the restaurant, about 10 minutes from the heart of Naples.

"When the restaurant was founded, pizza was the food of poor people," said Condurro, one of 13 children. His brown shoes were dusted with flour from the bread dough. "The pizza of today is something you can eat all around the world, from rich to poor."

"We have 17 pizza makers," he added. "We switch teams from morning to afternoon."

Diners have a clear view of the pizza makers scurrying about a wood stove. Traditional Neapolitan pizza makers believe that the wood stove creates the crispness and the gently smoked flavor. The small pizza parlor is filled with the aroma of oregano and fresh, sun-drenched tomatoes. The workers gingerly press the dough with all of their palms and thumbs, a storied technique in Naples.

Condurro is an ambassador of Neapolitan pizza. Julia Roberts has had a slice of Da Michele pizza. So has Brad Pitt. Condurro has talked to chefs in Iran and Africa. A Norwegian newspaper ran a picture of Condurro with the cutline: "Mr. Luigi: A Living Legend of Neapolitan Pizza." He has never had Chicago deep dish pizza.

"The best food is from Italy," he said. "And then France."
During a visit to Belgium in 1952, Condurro ate in the Italian embassy -- every day.

"The chef was a friend," he said. "There was the famous restaurant Da Carlino from Romania in northern Italy. One evening we went there and found Beniamino Gigli, one of the most famous Italian tenors. My friend told him, 'You don't have to eat any pizza in Belgium. If you want pizza, just ask Luigi.' "

The next day Condurro visited Gigli and made a homemade pizza from scratch, sans oven. "The word got out there was a Neapolitan pizza maker in Belgium," he said with a smile.

The global outreach of Neapolitan pizza seemed ironic during my May visit as Italy grappled with immigration issues. The conservative Italian government was just a month old. They were pledging tough love on illegal foreigners who they claim are associated with crime.

During my visit the Italian police arrested 400 migrants living in shantytowns. Local vigilantes had attacked Roma (Gypsy) camps near Naples after it had been reported that a 16-year-old Romanian girl allegedly tried to kidnap an Italian baby. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who recently won a third term after being ousted in 2006, has proposed one of the strictest anti-immigration laws in Europe.

Pizza as the world knows it was created here between the 18th and 19th centuries. It was made in wood-fired ovens and then sold on the streets. Young vendors would balance a small tin stove on their heads to keep the pies warm. In 1830 the world's first pizzeria, Port'Alba, opened in Naples, replacing many of the street vendors. Port'Alba is still in operation in the historic town center at Via Port'Alba 18.

Although pizza was born in the lower class, the margherita pizza is named after Queen Margherita of Italy. She visited Naples with King Umberto I in 1889. The Queen was enamored by the flat breads the peasants were eating. Don Raffaele Esposito was the city's best pizza maker. He was summoned to the royal palace. He lit a fire of poplar logs in the oven and baked a combination of grated fresh tomatoes, finely chopped mozzarella and fresh basil. The red, white and green colors of the ingredients were a metaphor for the Italian flag. Esposito held the anchovies.

When in Naples, a city of more than 1 million people, try to find time to

make the 75-minute drive down to the Amalfi Coast. The winding journey through seaside cliffs is reminiscent of Northern California's Big Sur. At one point, you'll drive past Sophia Loren's old digs.

Good pizza can be found at the Al Mare Restaurant, open May through October, at the Hotel Santa Caterina along the highway in Amalfi (www.hotel-santacaterina.it) The hotel, which grows its own vegetables, has a stunning view of the Gulf of Naples.

And if there is time for only one agritourism diversion in the beautiful Amalfi Coast village of Sorrento (pop. 18,000), make sure it is the I Giardini di Cataldo (www.igiardinidicataldo.it), a large farm in the heart of town. Also known as "Cataldo's Gardens," the dense lemon and orange grove is owned by the city and operated by Salvatore Esposito. His family has watched over the gardens since the 1800s. He named the gardens after his father, who perfected the craft of grafting lemon trees onto orange trees to ramp up production.

Cataldo's Gardens offers free daily tastings of lemon liqueurs, wild fennel and a liquor flavored with licorice from Calabria at the toe of the Italian peninsula. You can buy bottles of limoncello at the garden gift shop to wash down your pizza, but the warm memories of southern Italy will never fade away.