



Brick oven pizza at Undici in Rumson.
Owner Victor Rallo, Jr.
(STAFF PHOTO: BOB BIELK)

Local pizza makers toss up tips for making the perfect pie

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Spreading a thin coating of San Marzano pureed plum tomato sauce on a plate-sized disc of dough, pizza chef Trinidad Agullar prepared Naples-style pizza at the Undici restaurant of Rumson.

Under the eatery's southern-Italian farmhouse-style wood beam ceiling, he arranged chunks of imported Italian buffalo mozzarella onto the pie and topped it with four fresh basil leaves.

"In Italy, they say a thing: 'La materiale prima,' which means the best materials, or the best ingredients as it refers to cooking," said Undici owner Victor Rallo.

The pizza, made with imported Italian "double zero" flour and extra virgin olive oil, is then placed on a long-handled peel and inserted into a brick oven.

In the oven, a wood fire burned to the left of the pizza. The temperature within reaches 700 to 800 degrees, Rallo said. The mozzarella, made from milk collected from Italian water buffalo, melts well in the high heat, he said.

"It's much sharper," he said. "Buffalo mozzarella is softer on the inside and has much more flavor."

Removing another cooked pie from the oven, Agullar tops the pizza with prosciutto di Parma, a thin-sliced ham, and arugula. He sprinkles another pie with grated pecorino Romano cheese and a pinch of Mediterranean sea salt.

A bite of one pizza reveals the faintest hint of wood smoke in the crispy crust.

The hardest part of pizza making is keeping the fire burning at the right temperature, Rallo said. Commercial gas-powered pizza ovens offer more standardized cooking temperatures than brick ovens, and typically run at 500 or 550 degrees. Each brick oven has its own intricacies and cooks at higher temperatures, he said.

"There's no thermostat," he said. "If it's too hot, you burn every pizza. If it's too cold, you don't get the proper rise, the proper color. Getting the top heat and the bottom heat proper is a process that took 2,000 pizzas to get it right on this oven."

In Italy, "everybody has a brick oven," said Joe Russo, owner of <http://www.raysrealpizza.com/> target="blank" />Ray's Real Pizza in Hazlet. Russo confirms that the New York-style pizzas prevalent at the Shore do not reflect the authentic Italian pizza he consumed growing up in Calabria, Italy.

"It's totally different between (the) USA and Italy," said Russo, who moved to the New York City in 1977 and later opened a pizzeria in Manhattan.

Russo cooks his pizza in a regular commercial pizza oven, but would love to have the space to have a brick oven built, he said. Brick ovens have a "better" heat and hold a more constant temperature because of the stone, he said. Thin-crust pizzas cook in two minutes or less in a brick oven, he said.

Italian brick pizza ovens often run hotter than the one in Undici, Rallo said.

"They're in the 800-900 degree range. They're about a hundred degrees hotter than us," he said.

Undici's pizza flour was selected to cook at the high temperature.

"If you used this flour in a regular (commercial, gas-powered) pizza oven, it wouldn't get brown," Rallo said.

The Italian flour he uses is not bromated or bleached like American flour, he said. It contains no preservatives, caramel malt for color, or rising agents. "It's really true, pure flour," he said. "People have this perception about pizzerias in the United States, and (people believe) it's a mall pizza shop," he said. "That's Americanized pizza."

"This is as you would eat it in Naples, Italy, the home of pizza," he said, gesturing to the pizzas on the restaurant's counter.

There are two popular types of pizza found in Italy, said Giovanni Atzori, Undici's executive chef. The "old-fashioned" pizza Italia is inspiration for the circular pies Undici's staff prepares. There also is the large, square pizza Metro found in Rome, he said.

Both are made to a higher standard than most American pizzas, Rallo said.

Russo agrees, and finds American pizza ingredients to be inferior to those in Italy.

"You need the real mozzarella cheese, 100 percent mozzarella cheese," he said. The cheese available in this country is commercial, he said, unable to hide the disdain in his voice as he repeated the word.

Russo and Rallo agree that fresh ingredients and skill are keys to delicious pizza.

In Italy, pizza is an art, and pizza makers are considered chefs, Rallo said.

"A proper pizza is in a sense gourmet," he said. "It's simple, but it's gourmet."

Authentic Naples-style pizza "is possibly one of the best things you can eat," he added.

"Everybody's on the run nowadays."

For the American people, a pizza and a glass of wine, a pizza and a soda, (or) a pizza and a beer are easy. It's quick. Why not make it proper?"



CELEBRATE PIZZA AT ANNUAL TOMS RIVER PIZZA, PASTA, PASTRY ITALIAN FOOD FESTIVAL

OpTo indulge in all things pizza-related, visit the fifth annual Toms River Pizza, Pasta, Pastry Italian food festival held from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 25, on Washington Street in Toms River. The event will include pizza-, cannoli- and pasta-eating contests, food preparation demonstrations, live music, "dough throw" contests and children's activities.

In addition, the United States Pizza Team will hold auditions during the festival. The team is a group of acrobats and pizza throwers who appear on television, at store and mall openings, county fairs and special events in the United States and abroad.

The audition will consist of a two- to five-minute freestyle dough tossing routine to music. Advance registration is required and limited to the first 15 contestants. Contestants must be 18 or older. Audition registration is \$50.

Visit www.uspizzateam.com for official USPT rules and regulations. To register, call Steve Leiber, director of operations, at 662-234-5481, ext. 122, or e-mail steve@uspizzateam.com.

Admission to the Pizza, Pasta, Pastry Festival is free. Visit www.downtowntomsriver.com or call 732-341-8738 for information..



Ray's Real Pizza is at
3429 Route 35 N., Hazlet.
For information, visit
www.raysrealpizza.com
or call 732-203-1600.

Undici Restaurant is at 11
W. River Road, Rumson.
For information, go to
www.undicirestaurant.com
or call 732-842-3880.

