



Pizzeria Brunetti; Italian-ness Can be Taught, and Learned

Francesca Sarda (January 07, 2014)



From Westhampton Beach to Manhattan. An American story. An Italian-American story. An intimately Italian story. Father-and-son Mike and Jason discovered the real Neapolitan pizza and fell in love.

It's considered a little Neapolitan gem in Westhampton Beach (103 Main St). A must for many folks. After five years, during which time the restaurant's success continued to grow, [Pizzeria Brunetti](#) [2] opened a branch on 626 Hudson Street in Manhattan. We stopped by just a few days after the opening.

There had been a lot of buzz in the neighborhood in the preceding months, especially after a



gigantic wood oven arrived from Italy. One New York magazine wondered: could this pizzeria compete with others in the neighborhood?

Since New Yorkers' palates have become increasingly sophisticated, pizza doesn't always mean the same thing. We say yes, indeed, we ate one of the best Neapolitan pizzas in New York! But who are the Brunettis? Whence the passion for pizza and Napoli?

Their story is worth telling. Mike and Jason, Italian Americans, only discovered Neapolitan pizza about five years ago. It was a whole other experience! Their enchantment prompted them to enroll in a Neapolitan school in San Francisco, then apprentice at Neapolitan restaurants, and finally open their own Neapolitan pizza business.

Mike, also a well-known hairstylist in the Hamptons, confessed that when his son told him he wanted to open a pizzeria, he was a little disconcerted. "I thought, 'A pizzeria? Another pizzeria?' Why on earth?

I had always wanted to work with Jason. He didn't want to work in fashion, but still..."

Among the contributing factors for their opening the restaurant were an article about the rebirth of Neapolitan pizza and a dinner at Keste, then a brand new restaurant managed by Rosario Procino and Enzo Caporuscio (today Rosario manages Ribalta in the East Village while Enzo is still at Kestè). Mike and Jason had never eaten authentic Neapolitan pizza before. And we should note that it was this little pizzeria in the West Village that proudly introduced Manhattanites to Neapolitan pizza.

We asked both men what they thought the first time they tasted it. "It was heaven. Unexpected. I could make out the flavors. It wasn't heavy. I could taste the flavor of what I was eating. And I discovered real mozzarella! It was love at first sight. I thought, 'What had I been eating up to that point,'" said Mike.

And Jason, an athletic guy with an impressive build you won't soon forget, exclaimed, "It was an unforgettable experience that changed my life. I decided I had to let others in on the secret too." Although their roots are in Calabria, this is the first time anyone in the family has launched a business with ties to Italy.

Why Pizzeria? "I like the name. But it doesn't mean we make small pizzas," said Mike, smiling. "A lot of our clients from the Hamptons come here looking for the same pizza they eat on vacation. Now they're telling their friends."

The concept of this new venue is to combine a wine bar and a pizzeria. But unlike the place in the Hamptons, it doesn't serve just pizza. "I decided that our chef shouldn't prepare too many Neapolitan dishes. Our menu includes some dishes from Campania besides the pizza. For those who want something else. My clients love knowing the story behind a dish, about the culture, where it comes from. It's a learning experience for them."

Chef Gerardo ("Don") Guarino, originally from Campania, stopped by our table as we were digging into dessert - unforgettable and very light zeppole and a Torta caprese. He brought us coffee made in a percolator. Just like home. Under his chef's hat he flashed that broad smile of Italian hospitality.

The Brunetti family's "pizzeria" is proof that the culture of Italian food can be transmitted, taught, loved, and made even by those who weren't born there or haven't lived under the Bel Paese sun. Italian-ness can be taught. And learned. We recommend the margherita, the fried pizza, and the parmigiana. Not to mention the zeppole. Perfect for dipping in Nutella.

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