

Inside Jersey

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ON THE SIDE



Upper Crust

A Mano

Chestnut Street at Franklin, Ridgewood
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amanopizza.com

We have seen the future of pizza. It hails from Napoli, it's baked in a custom-built wood-fired oven that blasts a concentrated level of heat (about 1,000 degrees) and it's ready in about a minute, give or take a few seconds, depending on whether you like your dough more crisp (as they do in America) or more soft (as they do in Napoli).

It's a pizza that's artisanal and elite, yet also simple and populist. Oh, and you know how you would never consider a pizza place a destination restaurant, how you would never drive an hour just to get a slice? Well, for this, you would, we promise, and happily so.

Fred Mortati is the handsome crusader of this pizza from Napoli, a food importer who developed such a burning crush on this pizza while doing business abroad that he vowed to bring it home, so he could eat it every day in Ridgewood.

"I love New York-style pizza, but it's a

completely different animal."

To introduce this pizza at his restaurant A Mano, Mortati didn't bring over just some ingredients and an oven. He flew in experts to build and install the ovens — using stones and volcanic ash from Italy — and then he flew in pizza artisans to train his staff.

This is because the thing about this pizza from Napoli is the crust — light, airy, fragrant and so thin it's almost like a crepe. It gets that way thanks to a precise sequence of events, says the pizza maker-cum-scientist, starting with über-pure flour made from the finest wheat and ending with a paddle guy who knows better than to spin his dough like a clown (too violent, too abusive, just ruins everything).

To do this in Naples, says Mortati, to become a pizzaiuolo, is to do something important. It's not a menial profession. Mortati is proud that his restaurant is certified by the Verace Pizza Napoletana and the Association of Neopolitan Pizzaiuoli, groups that keep a watchful eye on the authenticity of these kinds of things.

"I don't consider this an Italian restaurant. I consider this a trip to Italy."

Okay, so A Mano is Napoli, albeit assembled in America, but what does all this mean for you, the New Jersey diner?

It means, frankly, pizza dough that's a wisp of anything you've had before, more of a flirtatious tease or a hologram than an actual sturdy slice. Plus the dough is made with far less yeast — a time-consuming



and entirely different handling process, but one that translates also into far less after-dinner tummy rumbling.

This is pizza clean and light, plus A Mano holds its toppings to higher standards, too (prosciutto di parma, truffle oil, gaeta olives). The restaurant offers more than two dozen pizzas, including a must-have Nutella dessert pizza.

It's pizza to gush over and drive to, even among those well past their iron-stomached days of youth. Regular customers trek here from Bernardsville, from Chatham.

For now, A Mano is one of the few area restaurants (and we're including the five New York boroughs in that area) to venture into this bold thin world of pizza.

But Mortati sees an uptick in interest, and has advised pizzeria owners in Florida, Arizona, Brooklyn.

One warning: This is pizza that will spoil you. Customers tell Mortati: "You've wrecked me for pizza otherwise." — T. P.