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May 30

Taste & Tell: Enzo Pizzeria serves slices of manna from heaven

By N.L. ENGLISH

Every once in a while, you take a bite of something and it brings you up short. Your mouth is filled with crunch and oil, sweet tomato and liquid cheese. You are being nourished with pleasure. Life is so much better that way.

Enzo, a sit-down addition next door to Otto, Portland's premier take-out pizzeria, is a little temple to the basics.

The handsome details, many of which have been repurposed, bear no pretensions. Subway tiles keep the walls pure white after a quick rubdown and hold a menu painted in different sized and shaped letters -- a five-day project, the owner said.

Low-light bulbs hang down in front of one-bottle-deep, copper-backed shelves devoted to the six or so wines poured here, including the chewy house red, Piemonte Doc Barbera Ottone I 2007 (\$6 a glass, \$24 a bottle) from San Silvestro Cantine or the Librandi Ciro Rosso Classico (\$8 a glass, \$32 a bottle). La Carraia Orvieto Classico 2008 costs \$7 a glass and \$28 a bottle.

But the real stars are on the round metal trays.

The Margherita, Italy's simplest classic pizza, holds sliced tomatoes, basil and mozzarella. Even in May, Enzo (and Otto) bakes a good Margherita.

"Really, you're fighting the tide against those tomatoes," said owner Anthony Allen, who opened his first pizza place when he was 17.

But with crisp crust, good salt and cheese, he is still batting .800.

The olive oil in the dough and drizzled on top is extra virgin. For the pizzas with red sauce, Allen said, "We really use a beautiful tomato, harvested and canned within six hours -- from a county in California."

Allen, who said he is not a chef, has opened nine restaurants, with Otto and Enzo the last in the series. Pizza is what he really cares about.

"I don't have a sophisticated palate," Allen said, but he came up with mashed potato pizza with bacon and scallion, a marvel that should give Otto and Enzo landmark status in record time.

"We wanted something that would be more than a slice, more a meal for the lunchtime crowd," he said. "We use little red Bliss potatoes mashed with cream, seasoned with salt and cracked pepper, butter and parsley, scallions and hickory-smoked bacon."

The butternut squash pizza with ricotta and cranberries is another invention now stuck on the menu by demand. The herb-flecked tortellini with fontina pizza is genius.

But let me ask right now that customers allow Allen, his manager and chef Mike Keon to come up with new stuff. Allen said Keon has been bringing a lot to this endeavor.

A short rib and butternut squash pie, a brunch pizza with cracked eggs -- "We crack it just before it goes in the oven, and it's just perfect when we take it out," Allen said -- and other specials are planned for Enzo, which will serve pies a little pricier than Otto's set-in-stone \$3 per slice.

More reasons you will want to try everything you can at Enzo: "We know how to caramelize an onion properly. We know how to roast garlic so it's not acidic or bitter," Allen said.

"I've literally eaten pizza around the globe. I went to Italy when I was 18 and informally just watched how they were made," he said.

Allen's places were "the little holes in the wall that're kind of hidden that you learn about from the locals."

Allen opened his first pizzeria on Nantucket in 1981. "We basically fed the entire island, \$1.50 a slice. It was really, really popular. Nantucket hadn't discovered pizza yet, so I got really lucky."

From 2001 to 2009, Allen was a restaurant dealer and a commercial broker. "I've seen a lot of restaurant ideas. Otto and Enzo are a culmination of everything I've learned," he said.

You can order a \$3 slice and sit down at Enzo to enjoy it with a drink. You can also add the salad (\$3), plain and simple with a simple vinaigrette and fresh romaine and arugula the night I tried it.

A first taste of the individual pies (\$16.50 to \$18.25) at Enzo got me worried that the toppings were getting too heavy, but a later visit showed off the perfect balance, with red sauce and slices of juicy sausage and sweet onion scattered on top of blackened, crunchy manna from heaven.

The menu listed "homemade dessert," but "they haven't really gotten around to it," one server said.

Something about the server's patient, quiet presence on a Sunday night, when this end of Congress Street is as sleepy as a Neapolitan back alley after the midday meal, gives the little pizzeria the feeling of being old.

Maybe that's because what's being made here is as old as the first flour mills set by a river and the first stretched, blackened flat bread of the world.

When you figure out how to do it right, you come up with some ancient fundamentals of satisfaction.

As a character says in a book by Penelope Fitzgerald, "We can go on exactly like this for the rest of our lives."

N.L. English is a Portland freelance writer and the author of "Chow Maine: The Best Restaurants, Cafes, Lobster Shacks and Markets on the Coast." Visit English's website, www.chowmaineguide.com.



Bartender Rebeca Collado pours a beer at Enzo Pizzeria in Portland. In addition to the classic Margherita, popular pies include mashed potato pizza with bacon and scallions, and butternut squash pizza with ricotta and cranberries.

Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

Select images available for purchase in the Maine Today Photo Store

DINING REVIEW

ENZO PIZZERIA, 576A Congress St., Portland. 772-9435; www.enzoportland.com

RATING: *****

HOURS: Open 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday to Thursday; until 12:30 a.m. Friday and Saturday

CREDIT CARDS: Visa, Mastercard and Discover

PRICE RANGE: \$3 to \$18.25

VEGETARIAN DISHES: Yes

GLUTEN-FREE: Spelt-flour dough is under investigation, so ask

KIDS: Yes

RESERVATIONS: Not taken

BAR: Wine and Gritty's, Birra Moretti and Harpoon IPA on tap

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes

BOTTOM LINE: Crisp and savory thin-crust pizza with toppings held to a minimum showcase the transformation of flour, water, oil and sauce into a reason for living.

Rating based on a five-star scale. It is the policy of the Maine Sunday Telegram to visit an establishment twice if the first dining experience was unsatisfactory.

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