

FOOD DRINK DEAL

BY JEFF GROSSMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY TAHIER



The rustic interior of Spacca Napoli in Ravenswood; the Sorrentina pizza

NAPOLI COMPLEX *Talk about authentic: Spacca Napoli is the first spot in the city to get its pizza-making technique approved by the pros in Italy*

The massive wood-burning pizza oven in the open kitchen of Spacca Napoli is baking a Neapolitan-style pizza in 60 to 90 seconds at 1,200 degrees. It's so hot that it takes about five days to completely cool down—but a man named Peppe Miele is still hovering dangerously close, watching professional *pizzaiuolo* (pizza-maker) Nella Grassano shove a flat veggie-topped pie into the fiery mouth. She scoops a small pile of wood chips into the oven, then rotates the pizza with a large wooden paddle until it's done—dotted with small char marks and golden-brown bubbles.

Miele isn't the owner of Spacca Napoli; he isn't even the chef—but he is the President of the American Division of the Verace Pizza Napoletana (VPN), a Naples-based International trade organization that promotes and preserves the culinary tradition of Neapolitan-style pizza. Spacca's passionate proprietor, Jonathan Goldsmith, had been waiting since he opened the restaurant last winter for the VPN to inspect and certify Spacca Napoli as an authentic Neapolitan-style pizzeria.

But before requesting an official inspection, Goldsmith had to acquire all the necessary components: The first was the aforementioned oven, built by Neapolitan artisans and made with volcanic stone, cement, steel, three types of brick and three types of sand. The other was an Italian-imported dough mixer, which mimics the motion of bakers by reaching below the dough and pulling it up. Goldsmith's mixer is tucked away in a temperature- and humidity-controlled room in the basement, and he keeps the actual dough recipe just as hidden. "We follow an ancient artisanal tradition," explains Goldsmith, who spent eight months on and off in Naples perfecting the art of Neapolitan pizza.

And what exactly is it? Besides being thin and flat in the middle with a thick, puffy crust around the edge, you'll notice that when you bite into the pizza (each is roughly 12 inches in diameter), the bread is crisp on the outside but also has a wonderful soft chew after you take a bite. The flavorful dough has a tinge of sweetness and the soft consistency of flat Indian naan

bread. And, for all of the work that goes into the dough, the toppings on all 12 pizza varieties are fresh and surprisingly simple. The Margherita (\$11.50) is a classic, topped with tomatoes, oregano, garlic, basil and olive oil; the *Biana con Bufala e Arucola* (\$14) is topped with mozzarella de bufala (made from water buffalo milk), arugula, basil and olive oil. The *Funghi e Salsiccia* (\$12.50) is mild, topped with tomatoes, fior di latte mozzarella, basil, mushrooms, Italian sausage and olive oil. Without the loads of cheese baked into Roman-style pizzas, you'll find that the toppings tend to move around as you dig in; it only helps mix the fresh ingredients together.

A selection of about eight antipasti dishes, most of them grilled veggies dressed in extra virgin olive oil and garlic, make great starters to share. The Prosciutto e Arucola (\$8) is paper-thin, melt-in-your mouth prosciutto di parma, fresh arugula, shaved Parmesan and a drizzling of olive oil, while Zucchine alla Scapece (\$4.50) is zucchini cooked in olive oil, drained and intensified with white balsamic vinegar and fresh mint.

A small, but well-edited wine list features 19 bottles and nine glasses, which includes crisp fruity whites, robust reds and rosé wines mostly from Campania and Sicily, all served in traditional small glasses. The spicy Nero d'Avola Cusumano was a great deal at \$5 a glass, \$22 a bottle.

With your own pizza pie, it's easy to fill up fast at Spacca, but save room for dessert. The baked lemon ricotta (\$5.50) is imported from Italy and dressed up in-house with a raspberry coulis, creamed balsamic vinegar, raspberry and fresh mint, while the Spumoni (\$4.50) is made by third generation Neapolitans on Chicago's Southside.

But the focus at Spacca is on the pizza, and Miele happily offered the restaurant the official VPN certification at the end of his visit—number 236 in the world, 22 in the U.S. and the first in Chicago. ■

Spacca Napoli Pizzeria, 1769 W. Sunnyside, 773.878.2420. Lunch Wed.-Sat. 11:30AM to 3PM; Dinner Wed.-Thurs. 5PM to 9PM; Fri.-Sat. 5PM to 10PM; Sun. noon to 9PM. www.spaccanapolipizzeria.com