



diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrant

“Sicilian Pizza” is topped with plenty of crispy bacon, and a fiery hail of red pepper tempered by sweet red onion. | JESSICA KOSCIELNIAK - SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



LITTLE TO ‘LOVE’

Flour & Stone pizzas lose something in the translation

The website of the Chicago pizza joint Flour & Stone features the phrase “made with love in the Windy City.” I’m pretty sure love doesn’t have a flavor, and even if it did, I’m guessing it would taste nothing like the ex-

perience at Flour & Stone. In fact if they were to be truly accurate, the restaurant might revise that tagline to read “made with a pinch of ‘like’ and a touch of contempt.” Let’s start with the contempt. On multiple visits, empty neighbor-

ing tables were littered with the remnants of crust and covered in sticky soda rings and were never cleaned during my meal time. I can understand if the folks in the kitchen were so busy, they might not have a chance to make it out

to the dining room to clean up as often as they’d like. However, even the bar seating, which abuts the kitchen, had crumbs on it when I placed my order. And as for that ordering, when I’m paying \$16 bucks for a 13-inch

pie, I expect table service. Instead what I get is a nervous employee throwing a takeout menu down on my table while telling me to come to the counter when I’m ready. I also find that the orange soda from the fountain tastes mostly

like carbon dioxide because the syrup ran out hours ago.

The pizza here is cooked in a gas-fired oven made to look like a cool old-school, wood-fired brick oven. That isn’t always a deal-breaker. After all, some of the best pizzas in America such as the pies from the now-defunct Great Lake, were fired on a gas deck oven. At Flour & Stone, the gas vs. wood difference is like the one between those ironic faux-old school handsets you can plug into your iPhone headphone jack and a real cool rotary handset (like the one that curmudgeonly and defiant pizza maker Burt Katz takes orders on for the fine Sicilian-style pies he cooks at his namesake Burt’s Pizza in Morton Grove). Devoid of wood (or coal), the pies at Flour & Stone are not nearly as blistered, smoky and seasoned as the stuff coming out of the ovens at Coalfire or Spacca Napoli.

That being said, this is still where my “like” comes in to play. The interior of the pizza crust at Flour & Stone has more airy pockets than a bubblewrap factory. The outside is crispy, occasionally blistered, and mostly golden. They’re a reasonable if sanitized facsimile of a Neapolitan pie. And for a neighborhood, which, due to its high rents, has very little in the way of creative or high-quality food, that’s pretty good.

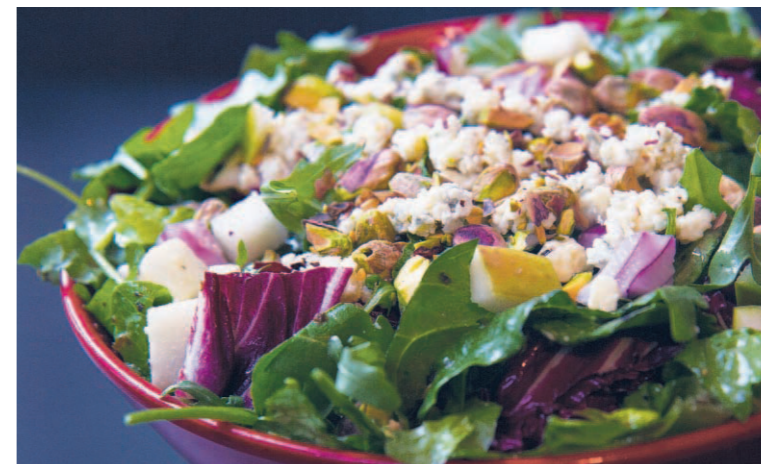
Though this observation may not sit well, either, as the owners have billed these as Brooklyn, not Neapolitan, pizzas. Real Brooklyn pizzas — whether the old-school artisan pies of Di Fara (Midwood section of Brooklyn) showered with fresh basil and Parmesan featuring a foldable crust and a droopy tip sag, or the blistered gems they serve at Roberta’s in Williamsburg — have a much puffer edge than the sometimes thin, crispy, lightly-leavened edges of the Flour & Stone pie.

Also, the acidic sauce here pounds you on the head and really could use a touch more salt and a bit of sugar to mellow things out. While this too-tomatoey sauce fells the basic Margherita pizza on offer, the mingle of earthy cremini and oyster mushrooms and onion and garlic on Flour & Stone “shroom” pizza do nicely counteract the acidity of the sauce.

Because of this sauce, it’s the “white” pizzas I prefer, especially



Cremini team up with oyster mushrooms on the “Schroom.”



The chopped salad is a mix of crisp cool greens, tangy green apple and pungent Gorgonzola, all drizzled with a sharp and sweet Italian vinaigrette.

FLOUR & STONE 1/2★

355 E. Ohio (312) 822-8998; www.flourandstone.com

Hours: 11 a.m. – 10 p.m. daily

Prices: Salads \$7-10; pizzas \$13-\$17.50;

Try: Sicilian pizza, chopped salad

In a bite: If you’re on the Mag Mile or Gold Coast, you might satisfy your salad cravings here, but otherwise grab a taxi and sate your pizza needs at Nellcote.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

the “Sicilian,” topped with what feels like a pound of crispy bacon, and a fiery hail of red pepper tempered by sweet red onion.

Another thing that’s pretty perfect at Flour & Stone is the chopped salad, an impeccable mix of crisp cool greens, tangy green apple and pungent, funky Gorgonzola, all drizzled with a sharp and sweet

Italian vinaigrette. If there’s any love to be found in the food at Flour & Stone, it’s definitely in this bowl.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.

SIDE DISHES



Nadine Karavidas, owner of Marie’s Pizza & Liquor, presents her thin-crust “Marie’s Special Pizza.” | JOHN H. WHITE-SUN-TIMES

Flour & Stone isn’t the only thin crust pizza game in town. Here are some other great Chicago thin crust pies:

RENO, 2607 N. Milwaukee; (773) 697-4234; www.renochicago.com

Vibe: Brick and rough woods, with tables built of knotty lumber and industrial black metal, this spot has a Portland, Ore., feel.

Flavor: The dough on the pies rise at the edge and droops slightly under the heft of gooey cheese at the center. The best is “The Southern,” a Korean/Kentucky mash-up of salty country ham, sweet roast garlic, fiery-fizzy kimchi and juicy tendrils of spinach.

MARIE’S PIZZA & LIQUORS, 4129 W. Lawrence; (773) 725-1812; www.mariespizzachicago.com

Vibe: Cheap-wood paneling, ancient waitresses who call you “honey,” and a wine program that consists of anything you can find at the liquor store next store.

Flavor: Cracker-crisp crust larded with thick hunks of fennel-kissed sausage and stringy bits of sweet onion cut into tons of tiny squares, Marie’s is the quintessential Chicago thin pie.

NELLCOTE, 833 W. Randolph; (312) 432-0500; www.nellcoterestaurant.com

Vibe: The foyer is outfitted with flocked ivory wallpaper and 400-plus mini-vases filled with French lavender, and the dining room is decked out with a Swarovski factory of glinting crystal and silky white upholstered Louis XIV-style chairs.

Flavor: Nellcote’s pizza is highly portable finger food, one of the best, if not the best, Neapolitan-style pizzas in Chicago. The flour for the crust is milled in-house and it manifests in a nice chew. There are lots of flavor combinations on offer, but the pie topped with meaty clusters of hand-pulled fennel sausage and oyster mushrooms is my favorite.

— Michael Nagrant



The fennel sausage, oyster mushrooms and Parmigiano pizza from Nellcote. | TING SHEN-SUN-TIMES MEDIA