

Greenwich Time

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A pizza party in backcountry Greenwich

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Last Friday was a perfect late summer night - not too hot, with a slight breeze. The wine was flowing. Great conversation all about. And the best part? Pizza for dinner and ice cream and truffles for dessert.

It really can't get much better than this.

Especially for Pizza Post, which beat out 11 other pizza makers, winning the title Best Pizza in Greenwich.

The blind tasting was held at the home of Carolyn and Jerry Anderson. This annual tasting - a way for the couple to thank the clients of their real estate business, Anderson Associates of Greenwich - showcases local businesses.

Background

"We had a small pizza tasting party in September 2003," Carolyn Anderson says. "In that event, there were forty tasters - Anderson Realtors and their husbands or wives - and the winner was Express Pizza."

The next year, it became the huge event it is today, bringing together about 160 old and new friends of the Andersons. On the menu that night: eight scoops of vanilla ice cream and eight chocolate truffles. (Do you understand how I can never say "no" to this event?) Friday night's dessert was the ice cream from the No. 3 winner that night, Longfords in Port Chester, N.Y., and the truffle from No. 1 Bridgewater Chocolate, a delightfully rich concoction that tastes as decadent as it looks.

"This was worth waiting for," Bob Zaccardo of Greenwich laughs, as he digs into his scoop of rich vanilla ice cream, complete with specks of vanilla bean. And before he can finish his truffle, a second one arrives on his plate.

Two years ago, 20 hors d'oeuvres were judged - a hot and cold selection from 10 caterers. Aux Delices of Riverside won for its cold hors d'oeuvre, Crab, Lime & Ginger Salad in Phyllo Cups, and its hot nibble, Peking Duck in Scallion Pancakes. Last year, the Andersons took a hiatus, swamped with deadlines for the seventh edition of the "Anderson Guide to Enjoying Greenwich."

Thank goodness they brought it back this year!

Pre-tasting

About 6:30, the pizzas begin arriving on Clapboard Ridge Road - 12 individual cheese pies from each of 12 Greenwich restaurants. In charge of the 144 pies is Patricia Donnelly, who with her crew, places the boxed pies in 6-foot-tall pizza warmers, rented for the evening.

As guests sip wine, sample hors d'oeuvres and listen to opening remarks, this crew of able women cut the pizzas into tasting slices. Each guest would receive the equivalent of a small pizza - with each slice from a different restaurant. The slices were arranged on a cardboard "plate" marked A through L, to distinguish the slices.

Jerry Anderson, explaining the judging rules, puts the judges at ease when he tells us we will be recording our votes in pencil, and those pencils all have erasers, just in case we change our mind. Next, Dwayne Ridgaway, author of "Pizza: 50 Traditional and Alternative Recipes for Oven and Grill," talks about his favorite food, which he admits he eats a lot. He's filled with factoids about pizza - 100 acres of pizzas per day are consumed in the United States; in 2004, a Romanian man ate 100 pounds of pizza in a week; pizza did not only originate in Italy, but is the product of many ancient cultures, including Greek, Roman and Egyptian, a fact especially enjoyed by Greece native George Georgitseas of New Canaan, who brought along daughter, Margaret, a junior at Greenwich Academy, to judge.

Taste buds whetted, it was time to get down to business.

The pizza

The next time you are talking to a few people, throw out the question: "What's your favorite pizza?" And then listen to the answers as each person describes what he or she likes best about the pizza of choice. Some judge their pizzas by the crust - thin, thick or a mixture of both. For others, it's the sauce, with some preferring chunky, others smooth, with just the right amount of herbs and spices to match individual palates. And then there are those who judge by the toppings, especially the cheese, fresh mozzarella or not, and the amount of saltiness it gives the pie.

Our table of eight was no exception, although our results were surprisingly similar. We all also agreed that the one that left the grease spot on the cardboard plate was extremely unappetizing.

The results were amazingly close - in fact only 11 votes separated first from fourth place. The winner, Pizza Post, scored 408, with Sound Beach only four votes behind. Arcuri's got 401 nods; Bella Nonna 397.

Joe Criscuolo, who with his brother, Matt, took over Pizza Post from their dad, Luca, four years ago, says he is "thrilled" with the win but adds that just being chosen to be in the tasting was an honor.

"We're probably the oldest pizza place in Greenwich," Criscuolo says. "A lot of people don't realize how long we've been here. It's great to get recognition."

A Margherita pizza - plum tomatoes, basil, mozzarella and a little olive oil - is a favorite of Pizza Post customers. "Everyone keeps it simple; the simpler the better," he says. "I believe we were the first to bring the Margherita pie to Greenwich, years before anyone else started making it."

Speaking of that pie, the first pizza delivery was to Queen Margherita of Italy in 1889 - just one of hundreds of pizza trivia written on every judge's name tag.

And one more fact: Ridgaway's favorite pizzas are grilled, so today we offer a recipe from his book - a New York-style pizza topped with garlic, sausage, meatballs and basil. Wherever pizza originated, for me, this pizza screams: "That's Italian."

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RECIPES

Basic Pizza Dough

1 1/2 cups warm water (110-115 degrees)

1 1/4-oz. pkg. active dry yeast

1 tsp. sugar

3 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

1/2 cup semolina flour

1/3 cup olive oil, plus extra for brushing bowl

1 tsp. salt

* Combine the water, yeast and sugar in a large mixing bowl; stir to combine and dissolve yeast. Set aside until foamy on top, about 5 minutes. Add 1 1/2 cups flour, semolina, 1/3 cup olive oil and salt. Mix by hand using a wooden spoon until smooth.

* Continue working flour, 1/4 cup at a time, into the dough until all the flour is incorporated but the dough is still slightly sticky, Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead until smooth but still tacky, 3 to 5 minutes.

* Coat a large mixing bowl with oil, place dough in bowl; turn to coat all sides. Cover with plastic wrap or clean kitchen towel and place in a warm, draft-free area to double in size, about 1 to 1 1/2 hours. Punch down dough; divide into two equal portions. Roll each portion into a ball; store in airtight bags or use according to recipe.

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New York-style Stone-baked Pizza

1 round Basic Pizza Dough, recipe precedes

1 Tbsp. coarse cornmeal

Extra-virgin olive oil

1 1/2 cups tomato sauce, homemade or purchased

8 oz. shredded mozzarella cheese

3 cloves garlic, chopped

8 oz. ground sweet Italian sausage, cooked and crumbled

12 oz. meatballs, sliced, homemade or purchased

1/4 cup loosely packed fresh basil leaves, roughly torn

* Preheat grill to high with pizza stone (if using). Stretch dough to thin round. Oil and grill on each side until golden and crisp, about 3 minutes per side. Dust peel or pan with cornmeal; top with grilled dough. Drizzle with olive oil; spread on even layer of tomato sauce, reserving 1/2 cup. Top with mozzarella, garlic, sausage, meatballs; dot with remaining sauce. Transfer pizza to stone; bake 15 minutes or until cheese melts and starts to brown. Remove. Sprinkle with basil; let sit 5 minutes. Slice and serve.

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