



DEEPLY DELICIOUS

The legendary heft of Chicago's deep dish pizza—that thick-crust, pan-baked concoction of meat, chunky tomato sauce, and other ingredients entombed in molten cheese—dates to 1943, when the founder of the original Pizzeria Uno (a Texan named Ike Sewell) introduced a pie he had designed to be a one-dish meal. Loosely based on Sicilian-style tomato breads, Chicago deep dish grew in density as it became more popular, but in recent years, a number of pizza purists have forsaken the belly bombs served in many downtown pizza parlors in favor of the leaner and fresher-tasting pies proffered at a pizzeria called Burt's Place, just north of the city in the suburb of Morton Grove.

The pizzas, made with handpicked ingredients from local suppliers, may mark a welcome departure from tradition, but the establishment is decidedly old-fashioned. Located in a century-old former blacksmith shop on a residential street, Burt's is so difficult to find that town planners have mounted signs on nearby Lincoln Avenue to direct wayward pizza pilgrims. Inside, Burt Katz, the 70-year-old, amply bearded proprietor (he claims he last shaved on March 12, 1971, when he ditched his corporate day job), takes orders on an old rotary phone while perched in a brown vinyl booth. Above him hangs a canopy of curiosities: a three-foot-long whisk, a wooden propeller from a 1930s biplane, and a garland of ham radio operator licenses (given to him by customers over the 36 years Burt's has been open), among other things.

Katz is fond of spinning yarns from his murky but colorful past—a road trip across Asia in a 1962 Toyapet truck, drinking tea with Afghan politicians, spotting the late Mob capo Joey Glimco at a public steam bath—but his listeners know that the real legend is his pie. Katz wakes up at four in the morning to shop for his ingredients: Italian sausage made by a local butcher, mozzarella, and fresh vegetables. For the dough, which he makes multiple times a day, "there's no recipe", he says; just a memorized formula.

Baked in steel pans blackened by decades of use, his pies are shallower than most deep-dish versions and emerge from the oven with a top crust of caramelized cheese and a crisp, flavorful bottom. The style, which Katz started to develop at pizzerias in the 1960s, is so unusual that fans around the country have asked on Internet food forums where they can find comparable pies (to which aficionados refer as Starback style, after the original name of Burt's Place). Tough luck: Katz continues to turn down franchise offers. —*Michael Nigrant*

