

# eat & drink

## From Milan to Chicago



Margherita pizza at Ciao Bella. HILARY HIGGINS PHOTO FOR REDEYE

### Can Ciao Bella's pizza rise above its strip-mall location?

By Michael Nagrant

FOR REDEYE

Despite their reputation for suburban blandness, strip malls in Chicago have managed to yield a handful of culinary gems. High-end dining destinations such as Goosefoot and Elizabeth make their home in mini-malls. Chef Bill Kim's Urban Belly was born in a humble Avondale shopping complex. One of my favorite Filipino restaurants in the city, Isla Pilipina, is sandwiched between a Little Caesars and a convenience store in a plaza on the edge of Lincoln Square. When I heard Ciao Bella, a new wood-fired pizza parlor recently opened in an Albany Park strip mall, I stopped in to see if it would be a red sauce reverie or a Neapolitan nightmare.

**The pizzaiolo:** Prior to opening Ciao Bella, Meme Allam worked for approximately 25 years as a pizza-maker in Milan, Italy. Here in Chicago, he's a one-man band tossing and stretching dough, furiously topping pizzas, stoking the wood-burning oven (imported from Italy) with logs and flipping pies in and out of that blistering inferno with his long-handled peel. Though he works feverishly, Allam is as joyful as a kid at Disney World.

**The service:** While friendly and responsive, my server struggled with English and had a hard time understanding my order, most of which was accomplished by pointing directly to menu items. When one of my friends asked for a glass of water, the server brought out bottled water (\$1.50) without mentioning that they didn't serve free tap water. Some of my friends arrived 15 minutes before me and while they waited, Allam served them a marinara pizza topped with tomato sauce, garlic, basil and olive oil, on the house (\$5.95). (I made no reservation and the staff did not know who I was—this was just a nice extension of hospitality.)

**The crust:** The crust featured a satisfying chew and a good bit of char. The edge of the crust was a touch too thin for my liking, but I enjoyed the overall airiness of the dough. "We have some secret techniques that make our pizza super-light," owner Eddy Allam said.

**The sauce:** The marinara sauce was sweet, peppery and zesty. While the sauce was punchy, its flavor didn't overwhelm the flavors of the cheese and toppings. However, the sauce, especially at inner edge of the pie,

was unpleasantly thick and pasty. I'm not one of those people who leaves pizza crust on the plate, but because of this, I didn't eat most of the outer edges on any of the pizzas.

**The toppings:** Of the 31 different flavor combinations on offer, my favorite was a simple Bresaola pie (\$12.95) topped with a slather of olive oil, a gooey layer of mozzarella, a spritz of lemon and thin rosy-colored shavings of beef. I also dug the Bismark (\$12.95), featuring crispy slices of ham and a runny sunny-side up egg. The rich yolk and the salty ham reminded me of a hearty country breakfast. I tried to order the frutti di mare, a mixed seafood pizza, but the restaurant only had shrimp, so the server directed me to the *gamberetti e zucchini* (shrimp and zucchini, \$13.95) pizza. The tiny shrimp were mushy and bland (a few with their crispy tails attached), but the zucchini was plump, smoky and sweet. I grilled a lot of zucchini from my own backyard garden this summer and none of it was this flavorful.

**The sweets:** I went for the dessert calzone (\$7.95) and was rewarded with a doughy delight slathered with Nutella and ribbons of whipped cream. The football-shaped presentation was so breathtaking, a diner at another table exclaimed "Bravo!"

when it emerged from the kitchen.

Though the calzone was made with the same crust as the pizza, when served as a dessert, it tasted almost pastry-like. The Nutella and cream melted into a sweet pool of hazelnutty pudding.

**The scene:** The dining room was spartan and bordered on off-putting. Though the restaurant just opened, the chair rails were scratched, some of the ceiling tiles were sagging, a few of the vinyl stools were pockmarked and torn, and the red paint job looked sloppy. If I lived nearby, I might stick to delivery, which they offer to addresses within a 3-mile radius.

**The bottom line:** If you live in Albany Park or nearby Mayfair and you're looking for an alternative to the classic thin-crust served at Marie's Pizza and Liquors—and you don't want to schlep to Pizzeria Da Nella and Stella Barra in Lincoln Park or Nellcote and Pizza East in the West Loop—Ciao Bella makes a wood-fired Neapolitan-style pie, that while not quite destination-worthy, is above average.

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