

# eat & drink

The Wizard of Mozz



## Meet the most promising new pizza in River North

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

What do you get when you cross math references, an art gallery and wood-fired Neapolitan pizza? A place called Pi Gallery Bar in River North. Rising from the ashes of the now-defunct Gallery Bar, general manager Nick Martaus, beverage director Colin Haley and chef Donna Allers teamed up to create a craft pizza- and cocktail-focused lounge.

"Colin was here the whole time. I came in toward the end of Gallery Bar and Donna was a patron here and we struck up a conversation," Martaus said. "I saw this opportunity ... to move the focus away from street food and small plates and create something that was fun and not pretentious," Martaus said.

### The scene

The old graffiti-coated Gallery Bar space has been transformed with reddish-orange paint and a flickering wood-fired oven. The tabletops are handmade from cast resin by Martaus, who is also an artist, and though the gallery aspect remains, much of the art has changed. When I visited, the crowd was light—not surprising, since the second-floor location doesn't exactly invite walk-ins.

### The crust

The pies here are a great example of what Neapolitan pizza should be: charred, blistered, puffy at the edges, crispy in the middle and smoky from the oak-burning oven. The dough is made from finely milled double-zero flour, which lays the groundwork for a thin and crispy base, combined with high-gluten bread flour, which helps create a satisfying chew.

### The sauce

Even at the best pizza joints, the sauce is still sometimes the weakest link. It's often a simple mix of unseasoned crushed tomatoes, or it gets lost amidst a bevy of ingredients. At Pi, the red sauce is fiery, thick, well-seasoned and lustrous. Allers said she roasts San Marzano tomatoes in the oven "to pick up a little of that wood smoke and concentrate the flavor," before mixing them with a blend of herbs, red chili flake and tomato puree. Allers also makes an awesome barbecue sauce with molasses, chipotle and a hint of soy sauce that's a great alternative to all the cloying, artificial-tasting sauces you find on so many barbecue pizzas around town. There is also a cream sauce, which is subtle but blends nicely with the cheeses to

create a rich base for a couple of the specialty pies on the menu.

### The toppings

The basic margherita, aka The Wizard of Mozz (\$15), features that spectacular red sauce, hand-torn basil leaves and fresh mozzarella. Sliced fresh tomato on top doubles the flavor and adds a contrasting, almost meaty texture that sets it apart from your average margherita pie. Allers uses the barbecue sauce as a base not for ubiquitous chicken, but for melting cubes of luscious pork belly in the Notorious P.I.G. pie (\$18). "In the mornings, the wood-burning oven has some residual heat. It's the perfect temperature for braising pork belly, so we cook it in there for a couple hours to pick up some of the wood smoke," she said. There's also sweet diced apple, red onion and a sharp blend of goat and ricotta cheese that echoes the delicious funk that emanates from pork belly. The best combo is the Oh, Dawn-a, a breakfast pizza (\$17) smothered with cream sauce, sausage, gouda, fontina, crispy hash browns and a fried egg. It's a hangover helper of the finest proportions, the glorious kind of accident that might happen if a Waffle House

exploded and landed on Spacca Napoli. The pies are cut into eight slices and are about 13 inches in circumference. Because they're thin-crust, you'll likely want a couple of pies for a party of two if you're really hungry (and you'll have some leftovers).

### The drinks

The cocktail and beer lists are pretty solid. I especially dug a blood orange-flavored gose (a German-style unfiltered wheat beer) from Anderson Valley Brewing Company (\$7) and the Bourbon Babe (\$15) featuring Prichard's Double Chocolate bourbon, maple-black pepper syrup, plum bitters and a skewer of candied pork belly.

### The bottom line

Pi Gallery Bar succeeds at being the unpretentious cocktail and pizza experience its partners envisioned. With the art and handcrafted decor, it feels a bit like a funky coffee house, but one devoid of bearded dudes with thick glasses pontificating. Yeah, it's got a weird name and an odd location, but it's worth seeking out for the undeniably great pizza and solid drink list.

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