



The Diavola pizza at Pizzeria Da Nella Cucina Napoletana features crispy salami slices and a fiery red pepper flaked-infused sauce. (RICHIARDA, CHAPMAN - SUNTIMES PHOTOS)

For the first time in my life, great pizza has made me sad. Which is saying a lot. For I love pizza in all its forms, so much that, despite the ridicule of my foodie friends, I can find great beauty and inspiration in a frozen Totino's Party Pizza. And, so, to find sadness among some of the best pies I've eaten in my life, here at Pizzeria da Nella Cucina Napoletana, a new restaurant in

Lincoln Park, is unthinkable. Though, truthfully, it isn't the pizza that's brought me down. It's the grimace on chef/owner Nella Grassano's face as she pounds proofed dough balls sending clouds of flour in to the air. I suspect Grassano's consternation comes from the fact that this isn't her first rodeo, and that if things don't go well, it could be her last. It's a tough go luring patrons to this "difficult" location. I'm sad that an

artisan like Grassano, who deserves to make a great living for her effort, seems to be having such a tough time. Grassano is maybe the most important person in Chicago's recent pizza renaissance — its doyenne of dough, if you will. Before there was Great Lake, Coalfire, Antica, Apart and the great pies at higher-end restaurants like Bakara and Nellcote, there was Spacca Napoli. Grassano was the original pizzaioia

at Spacca Napoli, a third-generation pizzamaker from Naples, who, in the late winter of 2006, showed Chicagoans that pizza was not just a knife-and-fork-required affair. She showed us that great pizza is a study in contrasts, of blistered, bubbling, high-rising crispy edges and a chewy, slightly droopy center. She showed us that a real pie does not take 45 minutes — roughly the time needed to consume

an order of garlic bread, an antipasto and a fried mozzarella stick/shrimp/onion ring appetizer basket. (The light delicate pies at Nella take only about a minute to ninety seconds to cook in the 900-plus degrees, wood-fired brick oven). And yet, despite the adulation, as Grassano pulls a pizza peel across a wood-fired oven made of imported Italian ash and Vesuvio stone, she looks as though she's slumping under some major

but invisible heft.

Certainly, the room, painted sunny yellow and outfitted with rustic deeply grained dark woods, can't be bringing her down.

Nor does this weight have anything to do with the quality of the pizza. In Chicago I've rarely had better, even at Spacca Napoli. The pies at Nella (at least on my visits) are all made by Grassano, not some well-trained proxy. Her fingers recall dough the way a blind man reads Braille, cooking them in to a perfect 12-inch rounds, pie after pie. Once the pie is in the oven, she monitors the entire bake, adjusting the pie's oven placement at the sight of too much blistering or not enough browning.

And for all that attention she produces a pizza with a satisfying chew at the center and a perfect puffy rise at the edges. Though much is made of food miles these days, Nella prefers to import many of her ingredients directly from Italy. And, yet to breach the edges of her basic

Margherita pie, to inhale a creamy circle of fior di latte mozzarella, to graze on the tangy zip of San Marzano tomatoes and the spicy crispy charred anise perfumed edge of whole basil leaf, is to realize that sometimes authenticity trumps localness.

They make fine prosciutto in Iowa and Wisconsin these days, but none quite have the salt, the sweet funk or the translucent scrim of fat and flesh you find in the slices from the Parma ham on Grassano's Prosciutto e Rucola pie. The salt and fat mingle with smoky mozzarella and the peppery bite of arugula. If you want a little more bite, the Diavola — with its shreds of crispy salami and fiery red pepper flaked-infused sauce — will fill that void.

Meat lovers will dig the fennel-kissed bits of Italian sausage and plump bits of mushroom on the Funghi Salsiccia pizza. Even my wife, who generally eschews sausage (or at least the thick hunks of hand-pulled stuff you find on a typical

Chicago pizza), loves the lighter, more diffuse sprinkle of pork Grassano uses.

Though I'm pretty sure it's a scientific principle that man can live on pizza alone, there's plenty of other stuff at Nella including salads, risotto and pasta cooked by Grassano's brother. The insalata di mare — a lemon, garlic and oil-tossed mountain of pristine calamari, shrimp, octopus, clams and mussels — is one of my favorites. A bite or two conjures an afternoon lunching on the Amalfi Coast. You can almost feel the Prosecco buzz.

Because the salads and the pizza are light, there is always room for dessert at Nella including a wood-fired pie topped with a slather of Nutella and a hail of confectioners sugar. Fold it in half and you've got a major improvement on those floppy ubiquitous food cart crepes you see everywhere.

Will this new eatery succeed? Grassano had a tough run with other business partners including a short run with Mia

Francesca maestro Scott Harris at Nella Pizzeria Napoletana. I gave that place a tough review back in 2009. But that wasn't Nella's pizza. There was a team of dudes making the pies on an assembly line with substandard toppings.

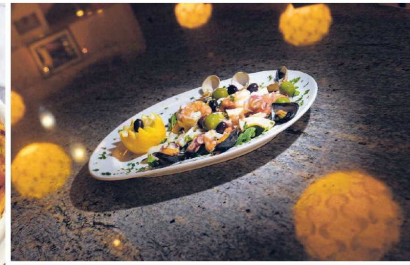
Then again, this new spot is located in a no man's land of sorts, a high-traffic, tough-to-find parking area of Fullerton just east of Ashland. And it's tough to comment on the service at Nella, because on my visits though it was quite good, the staff outnumbered the patrons.

But the restaurant business is not like a Kevin Costner movie — just because you build it, they don't necessarily come. But, at least this once, they really should.

Michael Nugrant is a local free-lance writer. Follow @michaelnugrant. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at dining@suntimes.com with questions and comments.



Parma ham (aka fine Italian prosciutto) on the Prosciutto e Rucola pie is a delicious affair of salt and fat that mingles with smoky mozzarella. It's all topped with peppery arugula for an added flavor layer.



ABOVE: The insalata di mare — a lemon, garlic and oil-tossed mountain of pristine calamari, shrimp, octopus, clams and mussels — is not to be missed.



LEFT: Chef/owner/pizza maker Nella Grassano sends another of her tasty pizza pies into the 900-degree brick woodburning oven at Pizzeria da Nella Cucina Napoletana. (RICHIARDA, CHAPMAN - SUNTIMES PHOTOS)