

eat & drink

Pepperoni pizza on thin sin crust
KATELYN MCQUAID FOR REDEYE PHOTOS



THIN SIN IS IN

Try the tasty pies at Lincoln Park pizzeria Stella Barra

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE
Push. I've heard a lot of great chefs say it. Push through the pain. Push forward. Push past your limits. The difference between the successful chef and your average line cook, or so it appears, is returning a force just a little harder than the force that comes at you, aka pushing.

"Push" is also what's tattooed on the right wrist of Jeff Mahin, the executive chef partner behind Stella Barra, a new pizzeria in Lincoln Park. Mahin—who did time at Nobu and The Fat Duck (once rated the best restaurant in the world), helped Laurent

Gras open LeO and became one of Lettuce Entertain You's youngest partners, all before age 30—embodies that tattoo.

Despite all his work, his accolades, the success of two Stella Barra restaurants in California and the launch of Do-Rite Donuts in the Loop, I never heard of the guy until I sat down to dinner Stella Barra (owned by Mahin and Lettuce Entertain You) a few weeks ago.



The crust: So many pizza places treat their dough like Kanye West treats haters, which is to say with a healthy dose of disdain and neglect. They freeze it. They add filler. They don't let it rise long enough.

Before he opened his first pizzeria, Mahin tested 30 different recipes, settling on dough made from fresh-ground California wheat, filtered water and sea salt. He mixes these ingredients together and lets the dough rise for days. The dough is double-proofed, which means it rises for 24 hours and then is put in clear jars and left to rise again for 12 hours or more. The dough is then carefully removed from the cylinder and stretched by hand for each order. The center is punched down, but the edges are protected, never disturbed or prodded, so that the exterior rise is preserved. The result is a crackling, almost rustic sound-dough-like

center and a puffy, chewy rim. This is the best pizza crust I have had since I ate the pies at Nello's made from house-milled double-zero flour. It might even be better.

Because Stella Barra first opened in Southern California, the land of diet fads, Mahin also offers each of his pizzas in a "thin sin" crust version. When my server asked if I wanted thin sin crust on any of my pizzas, I flashed him a look of disbelief, confusion and anger. I eat butter. I use sugar. I do not diet. But my job is to judge the result and not the idea, so I relented and got one of my pies this way. I'm glad I did. The result is a crisp, almost baked tortilla-like crust that crackled with each bite. The closest I've had to thin sin crust might be a Chicago cracker-thin crust. But cracker crust is usually dry, whereas Mahin's thin sin had a slight pliability and moisture I haven't tasted anywhere else.

The toppings: I had my thin sin crust topped with golden shaved rounds of butternut squash, crunchily candied bits of bacon, slivers of fiery Calabrian chili, wisps of parmesan and pungent spicy florets of oregano (\$15.95). The sweetness of the squash and the occasional smiting bite of the chili was explosive. Fancy pizzas abound here, including one with gruyere and black truffle (\$15.95), but I won-

dered what happened when Mahin couldn't hide behind luxury ingredients, so I checked out the basic pepperoni pie (\$14.95). Topped with oozy knobs of mozzarella and wafers of crackling garlicky pepperoni, this pizza was perfect.

The sauce: While the cheese and meat were stellar, the real star was the chunky salsa-like tomato sauce, which had a tremendous mouth-watering savoriness rounded out by a sweet finishing note. If I

could, I'd carry a flask of the stuff with me for dipping breadsticks, or drinking straight, whenever I felt like it.

The scene: The dimly lit room—which features dark walls outfitted with industrial conduit and construction-site hazard light fixtures, big overstuffed booths and mixed styles of mid-century modern dining chairs—feels more like a cool lounge than a pizza parlor.

The bottom line: You may never have heard of Jeff Mahin, but after eating a few of the thoughtful, well-crafted tasty pizzas—some of the best in town—at this new Chicago outpost of Stella Barra, you will not forget his name.

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Burrata with roasted grapes