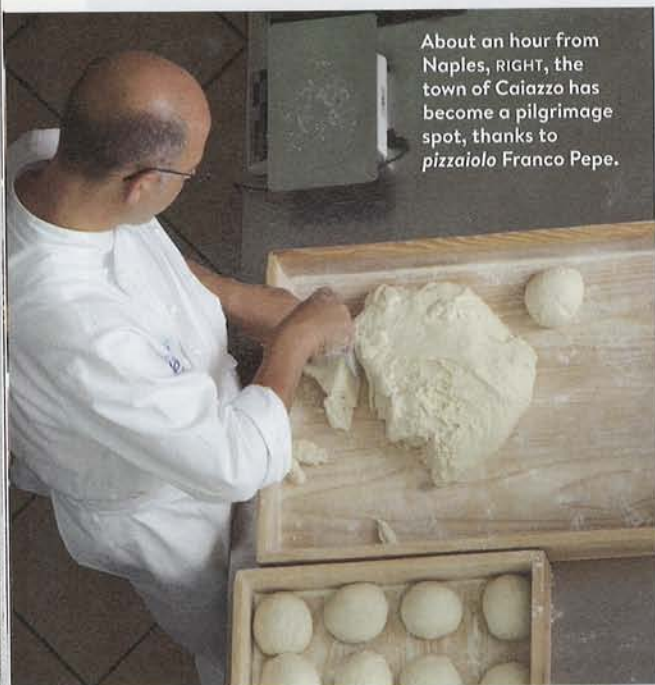


“It’s Probably the Best Pizza in the World”

ACTING ON A HOT TIP FROM CHEF NANCY SILVERTON, WRITER JONATHAN GOLD TRAVELS TO ITALY TO MEET THE MODERN-DAY ORACLE OF PIZZA.



About an hour from Naples, **RIGHT**, the town of Caiazzo has become a pilgrimage spot, thanks to pizzaiolo Franco Pepe.



NAPLES, IT IS WELL KNOWN, is the spiritual home of pizza. The pizza around every corner may be the greatest of your life. You can spend your days there sampling sfogliatelle from the splendid old pastry shops, delicate fried sardines from the *friggatorie* or thick hot chocolate from the cafés, but the two hours you wait in line for the city’s best pizza will reward you with pies as eventful as a long afternoon in Pompeii. Starita, where a young Sophia Loren made pizza in Vittorio De Sica’s 1954 film *L’oro di Napoli*, still produces its famous *montanara*, flash-fried before it is baked. And Brandi, which claims to have created the Margherita pizza in 1889, in honor of the Savoy queen, still serves its signature pie.

In Naples, however, pizza has a kind of secondary meaning. It evokes green fields; Campania’s wild, volcano-molded landscape; long Sunday drives. Pizza may be the essential taste of the city, but its savor depends on the thick-skinned tomatoes that grow on the slopes of nearby Mt. Vesuvius, mozzarella made from the milk of *bufala* around Caserta and Paestum, and fragrant olive oil from hillside groves.

Lately, the pizza one hears about the most comes from Pepe in Grani (pepeingrani.it), in the old Roman town of

Caiazzo, about an hour northeast of Naples. Its chef, Franco Pepe, who cooked for years in his family’s pizzeria a few hundred yards away before opening his own place, has been inching onto the international celebrity-chef circuit. Not quite 20 months old, this Caiazzo pizzeria already draws much of its weekend clientele from as far away as Rome. “My pizza is wireless,” Pepe is fond of saying. His dough is worked by hand in wooden boxes, left to ripen for hours and never refrigerated. The pork for his sausages, the olive oil and the *bufala* mozzarella come from just down the road.

Pepe even offers tasting menus that include Margherita pizza; pizza with *scamorza* and onions from the nearby village of Alife; pizzas topped with the incomparable local chickpeas, with capers and sweet anchovies, with figs and strong cheese, or with potatoes and mountain herbs. You can find similar toppings on other local pies, but not necessarily of this quality or this provenance. In Pepe’s pizzas lie all the flavors of Campania. He and an agronomist are even working on reviving ancient local varieties of grain.

So when Nancy Silverton came back from vacation last summer raving about a pizza she’d tasted near Naples,

Jonathan Gold, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, reviews restaurants for the Los Angeles Times.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LUCIANO FURIA (PEPE); CHARLES BOWMAN/CORBIS (NAPLES)

WIRELESS PIZZA

"WE HAVE NO MACHINES HERE, NONE," SAYS FRANCO PEPE OF PEPE IN GRANI.



Pepe makes 400 pies a night, all by hand.



After two risings, the dough is beautifully smooth.



Pepe sometimes sprinkles pepper on his dough.

I knew exactly where she had been. I didn't know how her life had been changed, though. Her Pizzeria Mozza in Los Angeles is usually considered among the best pizzerias

"If I'd known about Franco Pepe before I opened Mozza, I probably wouldn't have made pizza at all," Nancy Silverton says.

in America, famed for its organic ingredients and risen, fermented crust. Her pizza isn't traditional, but it is superb. "Neapolitan pizza isn't my style," Silverton says. "I've never had pizza in Naples that I've liked. But if I'd known about Franco Pepe before I opened Mozza, I probably wouldn't have made pizza at all. People have been making it for hundreds of years in Campania,

but it feels almost as if Franco invented pizza and everyone else is just copying him. It's like chefs doing molecular cuisine after Ferran Adrià at El Bulli. It's kind of hard to explain, but Franco has this glow around him. His is probably the best pizza in the world."

So I booked a ticket to Italy. And not long afterward, I found myself behind the wheel of an Alfa Romeo Giulietta, winding up the narrow road toward Caiazzo, twisting past what seemed like an infinite number of *bufala* mozzarella shops and rustic pizzerias, the scent of wood smoke and garlic almost permanently in the air. To drive into the Caserta hills is almost like driving into a pizza itself. And when you get to Caiazzo on a Saturday night, the modest hill town is full, every parking space taken, the main street through the *centro storico* clotted with pedestrians—and you realize, when you walk down the steep, cobbled side street toward the restored 18th-century palazzo occupied by Pepe in Grani, that almost everyone you see is waiting for a table in the restaurant. The wait, you are told, is three hours. You leave your name and wander into town for a drink.

Franco Pepe is a third-generation *pizzaiolo*, brought up with the smell of oregano in his nostrils. In the early part of the last century, much of southern Italy was still basically run on the sharecropping system, where farmers on leased land were largely paid not in cash, but in crops. Pepe's grandfather, a wheat farmer, realized that his grains would be worth more made into bread and pizza than as a commodity. The family's pizzeria, a modest restaurant facing the Piazza Porta Vetere, near Pepe in Grani, became a landmark in Caiazzo—the Osteria Pizzeria Pepe is still featured in some guidebooks to the region; they especially praise its ethereal white calzone stuffed with escarole and cheese. "The story of our family pizzeria," Pepe says, "is a story born in hunger. I can never forget that."

In the kitchen of Pepe in Grani, there is a gleaming metal canister in the kitchen crowned with a festive conical lid. This is where they keep the *pizza a libretto*, so called because it is eaten folded in four like a booklet. The tiny

pie is sauced with only tomato and a bit of oregano. Pizza *a libretto* is the original street version from the 18th century. The staff here bakes the pizzas at the beginning of the evening, before the crowds arrive, and stacks them in the box. Locals know that they can come in and order one for only a euro and a half—it is the local fast food. Pepe makes about 70 each day. If you get to the pizzeria before they sell out, you can munch on one while you wait for a table.

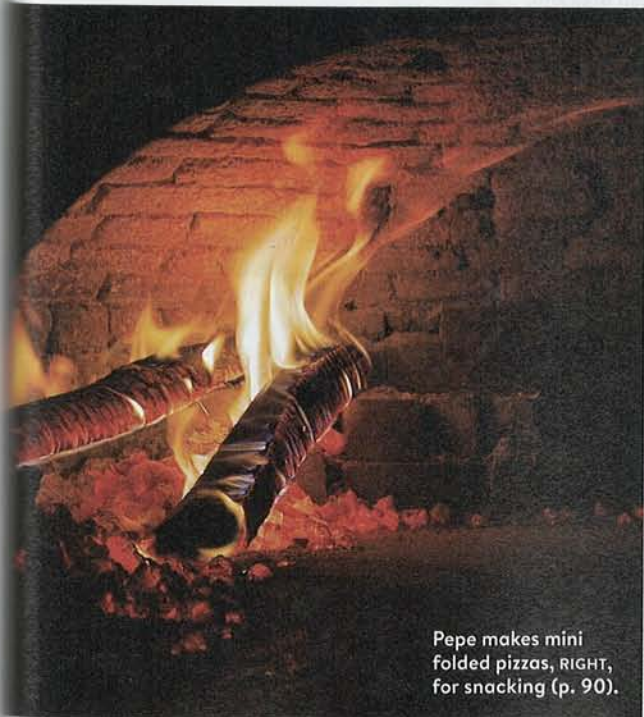
When Pepe's ambition inspired him to break free from the old pizzeria, to open a showplace grand enough to attract the world, he cried with fear. When he was restoring the palazzo, coming in past midnight after working a full day at the other pizzeria, he wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing. Italy was in an economic crisis then, and many shops in the *centro storico* were closing. His friends thought he was crazy to spend so much on a new restaurant—equipping the old building with sleek dining rooms and romantic terraces, with top-floor hotel rooms and a big screen so that customers could watch the balletic tumult in the kitchen—when the old restaurant was doing just fine.

Many people have discovered themselves to be anti-Neapolitan when it comes to pizza. True Neapolitan pizza is not paved with half an inch of melted cheese. It is made in wood-burning ovens, but smoke is rarely a factor in its flavor—it does not cook long enough to absorb the taste of the wood. It must be thoroughly cooked, with no raw spots, but its surface must not be overly caramelized. In fact, the aesthetic, at least as expressed at Pepe in Grani,

is absolute softness—the crust absorbs enough of the sauce so that the two components are essentially one: supple, thin and yeasted, but neither sour nor particularly risen. The suppleness of Pepe's pizza may remind you of the first time you ever experienced a Shanghai soup dumpling or a master's pappardelle. It is perfect.

After service, I go upstairs to watch Pepe make the next day's dough, his arms buried in the oozing mass, a drippy glob stuck to his forehead above his left eyelid. He works a huge tub of dough, digging deep, kneading and punching, turning it back onto itself. I had never quite contemplated the idea of the dough for 400 pizzas a night being turned out by hand. I was surprised that his forearms didn't bulge like Popeye's. "I am the primitive man of pizza," he says. "We have no machines here, none. The only technology we permit is a thermometer for the oven, but really, it is better to observe the color of the flames. Technology can make the process better, perhaps more precise, but it is no substitute for your fingers, your eyes, your nose."

He wipes his hands on a towel and points at a picture on the wall showing the family's old pizzeria kitchen, taken in the 1930s. "Notice—no sink," he says. "The cooks had to carry cast-iron containers up from the well each day and warm the water in the embers so that we could use it to make the dough." He says that hot water from the tap is now acceptable. But there is a distant look in his eyes. The corners of his mouth twitch down, and you can tell he thinks the old way was better.



Pepe makes mini folded pizzas, RIGHT, for snacking (p. 90).



Where to Eat in Naples

GAY-ODIN

This confectionery specializes in rich hot chocolate. *Via Vetriera 12; gay-odin.it.*

PIZZERIA GINO SORBILLO

A local pizza celebrity's perpetually mobbed classic spot. *Via dei Tribunali 32.*

PIZZERIA LA NOTIZIA

Franco Pepe's favorite Naples pizza. *Via Michelangelo da Caravaggio 53; pizzeria lanotizia.com.*

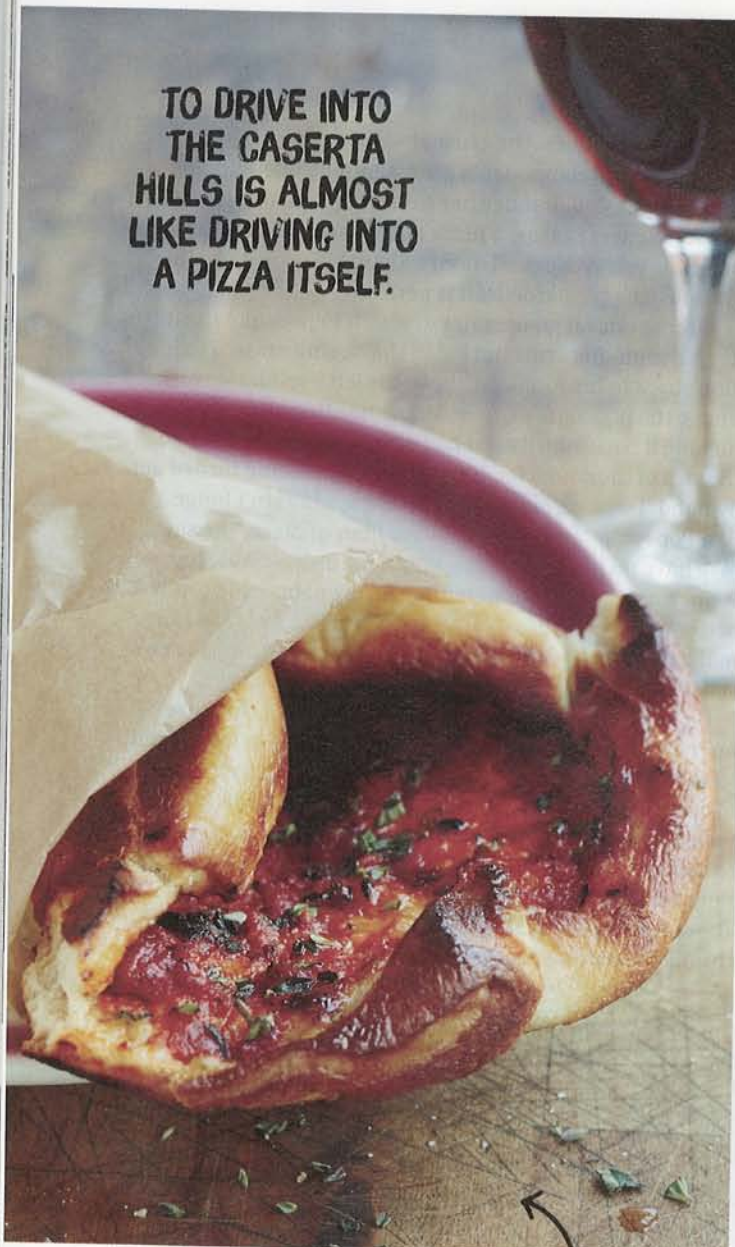
RISTORANTE DA DORA

Spaghetti piled high with tiny sweet clams, and other impeccable seafood dishes. *Via Ferdinando Palasciano 28-30.*

TIMPANI & TEMPURA

A hole-in-the-wall with street-food classics like deep-fried mozzarella. *Vico della Quercia 17.*

TO DRIVE INTO
THE CASERTA
HILLS IS ALMOST
LIKE DRIVING INTO
A PIZZA ITSELF.



SUPREME SNACK

Inspired by Franco Pepe, Nancy Silverton tops her remarkable pizza with only tomato sauce and oregano.

**Nancy Silverton's
Tomato-Oregano Pizza**

Active **30 min**; Total **4 hr plus
1 day resting**; Makes **nine
8-inch pizzas**

This is Silverton's version of the simple pizza that Franco Pepe makes as a snack for the locals waiting to get into Pepe in Grani in Caiazzo—he charges only a euro and a half for it. Silverton's supple dough is amazing, but you can also use store-bought dough.

DOUGH

2 Tbsp. plus ½ packed tsp. fresh cake yeast (not active dry yeast)

3¾ cups bread flour

Extra-virgin olive oil

1 Tbsp. kosher salt

TOMATO SAUCE

One 28-oz. can whole tomatoes, drained

2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for garnishing

2 tsp. kosher salt

2 tsp. sugar

Sea salt and dried or fresh oregano, for garnishing

1. Make the dough In a medium bowl, crumble ½ teaspoon of the yeast into ½ cup of lukewarm water. Let stand until the yeast dissolves, 3 minutes. Stir in ½ cup of the bread flour until incorporated. Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature until the sponge is bubbly and thickened, 12 to 18 hours.

2. Lightly coat a large bowl with olive oil. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook, combine the sponge with 1¼ cups plus 2 tablespoons of lukewarm water. With the mixer at low speed, add the remaining 2 tablespoons of yeast and 3¾ cups of bread flour and mix until combined, scraping down the side of the bowl, 2 minutes.

Add the salt and mix at medium speed until the dough is smooth and pulls away from the side of the bowl, 7 minutes. Scrape the dough onto a floured surface and knead into a ball; transfer to the prepared bowl and turn to coat with oil. Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature until the dough has doubled in bulk, about 1½ hours.

3. Turn out the dough onto a floured work surface. Fold the top and bottom of the dough toward the center, then fold in the right and left sides; flip the dough over and return it to the bowl, folded side down. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature until doubled in bulk, 1 hour.

4. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Turn out the dough onto a lightly floured work surface and divide into nine 4-ounce pieces. Shape each one into a ball and transfer to the baking sheet; brush the tops with oil. Loosely cover with a kitchen towel and let stand for 1 hour.

5. Meanwhile, make the tomato sauce In a food processor, puree the tomatoes until smooth. Transfer to a bowl and stir in the remaining ingredients except the garnishes.

6. Preheat the oven to 500°. Lightly grease four 8-inch cake pans with oil. Place 1 ball of dough in the cake pan and use your fingers to press and flatten the dough until it covers the bottom of the pan. Spread 3 tablespoons of the sauce all over the dough. Repeat with 3 more dough balls and more sauce. Bake the pizzas for about 10 minutes, until the bottoms are crisp and golden. Drizzle with oil and sprinkle with sea salt and oregano; serve hot. Repeat with the remaining dough and sauce. ●