



PIES IN THE SKY

Eugene pizza makers are a slice above the rest. BY MELISSA BEARNS

For years, *Chow* featured a section called *Triple Scoop*. A writer would sample something small, even snack-sized, from three different locations around town then review, compare and contrast. We're not sure why the tasty tradition fell by the wayside, but we're bringing it back and we're starting with an old favorite: pizza. Welcome to *Triple Slice*.

For pure novelty, amazing combinations you'd never try at home and straight-up pizza creativity, **Pizza Research Institute** (PRI) takes the pie. Tucked away near the corner of 13th and Lawrence, PRI has made a name for itself among pizza enthusiasts for their heaping slices loaded with goodies. You won't find combinations like pear and ricotta or toppings options that include baby corn, peaches, or buttermilk-poppyseed dressing anywhere else in town. In 2004, *Eugene Weekly* readers voted PRI one of the best pizza joints in Eugene.

Founded by Will and Usha Boise in 1997, the space is small and intimate. You're right there with the guy at the front taking orders and baking the delightful herb dough. They must put the dough oven up front intentionally, because it fills the space with a wonderful aroma. Standing at the counter, one customer remarked, "That herb dough is amazing. A friend of mine is coming to visit from Chicago, and I told him the first place we're coming is here."

Part of the PRI philosophy involves a meatless existence — they don't serve any carnivorous concoctions. But with so many interesting toppings to choose from, even the meat-and-potatoes crowd will be happy. For the PRI crew, the creative options are a way of life. "This is an extension of who we are," Will Boise said. "Four of our six employees are directly related to us. This is our family and we like to keep it fun and interesting. If someone has something they want to try, the chef's choice makes that possible because even if that item doesn't work, there's still a lot on the pizza." One topping that never quite made it was cactus leaves. Yup, those crazy kids at PRI will try anything.

For the authentic PRI experience, sample a slice of the chef's choice at least once. The night we visited, we were treated to a moun-

tain of vegetables including broccoli, cauliflower, lightly marinated eggplant, tomatoes, onions, ricotta, pear, chanterelle mushrooms, roasted potatoes and red peppers. Don't expect to put down a whole pie when you visit PRI — we could barely finish two slices.

It arrived at our table with the toppings arranged like a mandala. The fresh veggies were delicious, but taking a bite of the towering slice was challenging. I found myself dissecting it, munching happily on my favorite toppings. The slightly thick crust was necessary to support all the melted cheese and vegetable deliciousness on top. The light and flavorful sauce with hints of oregano, basil and garlic nicely complimented the veggies and added a kick.

For an out-of-this-world pizza experience, there's no better place than **Cozmic Pizza**. All the ingredients and toppings are organic, from the flour to the sausage. You even have the option of a

whole wheat crust.

Order à la carte from a long list of toppings or choose one of their chef-tested, customer-approved combos. If you like pesto, I highly recommend the Full Moon pizza on a whole wheat crust with sausage. Something about the combination of pesto, mozzarella, roasted garlic, mushrooms and meat makes this pizza one of the best I've ever eaten. If pesto isn't your thing, other options include the Odysseus (spinach, artichoke hearts and feta) or the Orion (pepperoni, sausage, red onion and kalamata olives).

But back to the luscious Full Moon. The crust is crispy where it should be and packed with so much flavor you could eat

it all by itself. Drizzled with olive oil and just salty enough to bring out the light, fluffy oven-baked flavor, it won over even the hardened white-bread skeptics at the table.

Moving upward in our slice, we get to the pesto. Whatever pesto Cozmic Pizza uses, they've figured out that when it comes to this element, less is more. Without any of the nasty oils, fillers and thickeners you often find in store-bought brands, the flavors of pungent basil, virgin olive oil, salt and pine nuts blend together forming a perfect compliment for the next layer: the cheese and toppings.

The sautéed crimini mushrooms add a slightly smoky, rich flavor that blends with the mouthwatering roasted garlic, packing a subtle punch in every bite. The organic sausage is also delicious, light, lean and full of tasty goodness.

Last but not least, our search for the perfect slice took us to **Ambrosia**. It doesn't jump to your mind when you think pizza? Well, it should. First of all, it's got the best atmosphere and ambiance of any pizza-serving restaurant we tried. With ornate lamps, dark wood, dim lighting, and nooks and crannies for intimate dining, this is the place to go if good wine and great conversation are also on the menu.

Pizza comes in one size:

10 thin, crisp, Italian-style inches. This is not a thick, doughy affair, sopping with sauce.

No. The crust of Ambrosia's pizza is light and balances the crunch of the edges with the inner layer that supports the toppings.

Ambrosia eschews the sweet, overbearing sauces you'll often find at mass-mar-

ket pizzerias, which turn out pies conveyor-belt style. The simple mixture of tomato sauce, spices and salt is used the way you'd handle an amazing salad dressing — sparingly, to accentuate rather than override.

We tried two different combos: El Diavolo and El Greco. Both were amazing. El Diavolo (which means the devil in Italian) came loaded with some of the most delicious sausage to ever grace a pizza. A wonderful change from greasy hunks of overly seasoned meat one is usually served, the sausage on El Diavolo was much finer in texture as well as flavor. Almost ground, it was evenly distributed over the entire pizza, adding a hint of smoke to each juicy bite. Along with the sweet red peppers and red onions, every slice was perfectly balanced flavor perfection.

The El Greco was a nice contrast, topped with feta, basil and tomatoes. Bursting with just-picked-from-the-garden freshness, the slight sweetness of the tomatoes offset the pungent feta and savory basil.

Whether you choose the crazy and creative slices at PRI, the organic and tasty toppings at Cozmic, or the truly Italian experience at Ambrosia, they'll do you right.

EW

Ambrosia's El Diavolo



An example of

PRI's Chef's Choice.

