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THAT'S AMORE

When the pizza dough flies, and why BY VANESSA SALVIA

There's a Curious George book about everyone's favorite monkey trying to throw pizza dough just like Tony, the pizzeria owner, does. He flattens the dough into a pancake and tosses it into the air. One blob of dough lands on a table where a woman is eating. One blob lands on a coat rack. One falls on the jukebox, and one falls on Tony's head.

When I try to throw pizza dough into the air, my experience is not far removed from that had by poor George. If Curious George can't throw dough, smart as he is and with four opposable thumbs, how can I possibly do it? Turns out, it's a fairly hard skill to master. It can take months to learn, even if you have someone skilled in the art teaching you.

"It takes six months of training to get someone from not knowing to being able to do it in a rush," says John Fitzgerald, co-owner of the two Mezza Luna Pizzeria locations in Eugene. Six months? "Oh yeah," he says. Fitzgerald, 42, grew up in West Caldwell, NJ, 25 minutes west of Manhattan. "I grew up with pizza my entire life, eating it every day," he says. "I started doing pizza in 1988, then started toward a more culinary career and decided it wasn't for me and went back into pizza. I've always been doing hand-tossing and trying to keep that going."

Fitzgerald shudders to think of the corporate chain shops co-opting real pizza, with their dough stretching machines and uninspired pies. "They have conveyor ovens and dough sheeters, and it's all machine made, basically," he says. "That to me takes the soul out of pizza. When we first opened the downtown location I had all these people from New York and New Jersey thank me for being here. That made me feel so good a couple of times I almost started crying."

For many pizza people, the art of throwing dough is a lifestyle. As with Fitzgerald, it's something that many people grew up with, thanks to the tradition of Italian pizza makers in the Northeast. Dave Cappella learned the art of hand-tossing pizza dough 18 years ago when he got his first job in a pizzeria in Charlotte, NC. "I wasn't old enough yet to work in New York," he recalls, his accent still audible despite years of having lived in the south, "but I saw it all the time. In western New York, pizza goes all the way back. There's a lot of pride involved in it. People in western New York don't eat Domino's and Little Caesar's, they eat in the traditional old shops."

When Cappella moved to Eugene from Southern California a year ago (he worked at another pizza place down there), Mezza Luna was the first place he ate. His parents recommended it, and when he found out that Fitzgerald was from New Jersey, he set about getting a job.

Cappella has worked at places with dough stretchers, wood ovens, brick ovens, every kind of place. He sees throwing dough as an important part of the pizza experience, even though there's not a strong technical reason to do it. "It's more of a showmanship thing. I would liken it to the flare that a bartender shows," he says, "It's very personal. You don't want to look like a robot back there. But it does help, don't get me wrong."

The theory is because you're handling the dough less, it stays tender. Plus, the faster you get the pizza onto the peel and into the oven, the more evenly it's going to cook.

Kids especially love seeing Cappella and the others at work, throwing dough behind his back and up in the air in Mezza Luna's open kitchen. But, he points out, it's not just kids that think it's cool. "We get adults going back there and asking us to teach them how to throw dough all the time," he says. "I tell them to get a part-time job at a pizzeria. That's what I did!"

I *did* get a job in a pizzeria, years ago. We had a dough stretcher, and there was no one on staff to show me how to stretch dough by hand or toss it. I tried a few times when there were no customers in the shop, but became disillusioned pretty quickly when I just ended up with a lopsided blob that flew everywhere except smoothly from my hands like I wanted it to.

Cappella says for those who want to try teaching themselves, it's okay to start flattening the dough ball out with a rolling pin. "Everybody learns as they go," he says. "Some people are just better at it than others. I've got soft hands I guess. Some people throw it up and their hands go right through it."

Just down the street from Mezza Luna, La Perla Pizzeria goes about it a bit differently. "We really don't toss the pizzas," says co-owner Gianni Barofsky. In fact, they aren't allowed to. "We do stretch them by hand but we don't toss them," he explains. "We stretch and pull them, which is actually the correct way of doing it."

The Italian government certifies the restaurant as a provider of



**Drew Marquess
throws the dough for
Mezza Luna**

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

authentic Neapolitan thin-crust pizza — in order to be certified, the owners had to go to a pizza training school. "We *can* toss it, our dough does toss well," says Barofsky. "The double zero flour we use gives it good strength, but we try and do it as authentically as we can. One of the things we were taught is at true Italian pizzerias, you pull the dough... pull it and turn it, pull it and turn it. By throwing it, it makes it real thin in the center and it doesn't make for an evenly stretched dough."

According to Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana (True Neapolitan Pizza Association, the certifiers), pizza can't be made by any mechanical means, including the use of a rolling pin.

The link between Italian pizzerias and the art of tossing dough is obscure. Perhaps, as Cappella notes, it developed purely out of a desire for showmanship. Most authentic-style pizzerias can trace their roots to some Italian pizza maker in the Northeast — the first pizzeria in the United States is believed to be Lombardi's, founded in 1905 by Gennaro Lombardi in Manhattan's Little Italy.

Fitzgerald isn't Italian, but he says that pizza is either in your blood or it's not. "You can tell within 10 seconds of someone touching the dough if they know how to make a pizza," he says. Watching him and his employee Mike Reisman at the Crescent Village location make pizzas is like watching a magic show. It seems an impossible sleight of hand... they both go from a ball of dough to a ready-to-make large pizza skin in about 20 seconds.

Reisman, who learned pizza in San Diego from some Brooklynite Italians in 1995, pats the dough out on the countertop with his fingertips starting in the center, while moving the dough in a circular motion. Then the palms get involved, and it's up in the air, then on the make table waiting for sauce. Blink and you miss it.

Fitzgerald, on the other hand, never touches the center. He squishes dough from the edges, flattening it into a pancake shape all the while, ending up with a more pronounced ridge of dough at the edges. "Your hands become like a tool and die, they only let so much dough through at one time," Fitzgerald says. "But also, if a spot feels thinner I move it through my hands faster. It's hard to explain. I always said that if I lost my eyesight I could still make pizzas, because it's so much about the feel of it."

Even though both Mezza Luna and La Perla have different techniques, and each employee has his or her own method, there is one thing they all agree on: making dough with a sheeter takes all the love and passion out of the product. If you can't quite get the hang of hand-tossing at home, don't despair. Even these professionals don't know all there is to know. "I've been making pizzas for 18 years," Cappella says, "and I'm still learning." ■