

SO NICE THE SPICE

Mezza Luna's classic peppery pizza is the perfect pie BY RICK LEVIN

It's not even on the menu anymore. But if you study the selection carefully, you'll run across a rider stating that certain Mezza Luna classics are still available, despite their absence from the larger list of featured pizzas.

On paper, Mezza's fine-print classics read like a line-up of the FBI's Most Wanted mobsters: Greekish, Fun-Guy Trio, Savory Garden, Spin Chicken, Nice Spice.

Nice Spice. That's the ticket.

Like one of those legendary, perhaps not-quite-up-to-health-statute pots of kimchi cooking away on the roof of some Chinatown café in San Francisco, available only to certain customers privy to the secret wink-and-nod, Mezza Luna's "Nice Spice" pizza remains available despite being dropped from the big list.

It's a crazy omission, because that pizza is heavenly. Crazy, but at the same time fitting — it adds to the lore and provides a certain zing for devotees who get the chance to "order off the menu" — like insider baseball for the culinary jet set.

Of course, the Nice Spice is not some esoteric, expensive dish available only to an exclusive and elite clientele; this pizza's stature remains demotic and completely available to all, so long as you know to ask for it.

Ask for it. It is the best slice of pie made by the finest pizzeria in town.

Mezza Luna co-owner Sandy Little says the Nice Spice was among the first pies they put on the menu when the popular pizza joint first opened (Mezza Luna placed second among pizzerias in EW's recent Best of Eugene readers poll).

"It's one of our classics," Little says, noting that currently the restaurant is celebrating its seventh anniversary. "It's really exciting," he says, adding that, even though the

Nice Spice isn't featured, "We make two or three of them a day, easily. It's still on our website."

Deceptively simple, the ingredients in Nice Spice include two meat toppings — spiced pepperoni and spiced salami — along with mushrooms, mozzarella, tomato sauce and pepperoncini peppers. This last, the peppers, is crucial to the pizza's kick, but what really defines this recipe is the delicate balance among meat, cheese and spice.

"The whole combo with the mushrooms — we were trying to balance things out," Little explains. "The mushroom, a more neutral flavor, adds a sort of bridge. The spiced-meat part of it was pretty straightforward. That's one of the those things that can go with a lot of things."

This is a pizza lover's pizza, a pie that deconstructs and reinvents the basic splendor of an uncomplicated slice. The perfect equilibrium of Nice Spice is achieved through a combination of daring and know-how; it is the introduction of a common fungus that brings the zing of the pepperoncinis down just a notch, to the ensalivating level of temperate tanginess.

Little says that, along with the Nice Spice, Mezza Luna features a roasted habanero tomato sauce on several of its combinations, as well as a variety of pies topped with jalapeño peppers. He says that, recently, he's even asked the pizza makers to "tone it down a bit" on the spice. Still, the habanero sauce gives you that "good, sinus-clearing, narcotic effect" that can lead to the "all-body glow" of immaculately maintained spiciness, Little says.



NICE SPICE PIZZA

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

In an era when certain meddlesome do-gooders feel compelled to pile their pizza with ingredients like walnuts, corn, sprouts, barbecue sauce or taco fixings, Mezza Luna's Nice Spice stands both as a corrective and a reminder that pizza is just pizza — not in the sense that a game is just a game, but in the sense that jazz is just jazz: Don't blow dolphin farts out of your alto sax and call it Coltrane.

When you slap chicken on a pizza and stuff the crust with cheese, you are violating one of cooking's most sacred orthodoxies, which is to keep it simple — nice and simple. Mezza Luna's Nice Spice, a pie that takes basic to the realm of brilliance, is the embodiment of that age-old maxim. ■

Mezza Luna Pizzeria has two locations in Eugene: 933 Pearl St., 684-8900; and 2776 Shadow View Dr., 743-2999; mezzalunapizzeria.com



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