

Marzano's

This Manzanita eatery serves good ol' pizza, but at artisan prices

Marzano's is the odd pizza joint that doesn't sell slices. Part of the reason, I imagine, is because the restaurant has a difficult enough time keeping up with demand for full pies. Waits are common.

I showed up on a Friday evening. It would be 25 minutes for a table. Alternatively, take out would be ready in 40. Now, this was in October, in crummy weather. (I can only assume that on a nice summer evening one could grow a full beard in the time it takes to be served.) The bottleneck is the size of the dining room (and probably the ovens). It's rather small, a collection of about eight booths, only two of which could comfortably accommodate more than four adults and a large pizza. It's dimly lit and starkly dressed — sharp, clean and mostly devoid of any intriguing character. I opted for take out.

From the three calzones on the menu — Vegetable, Roasted Vegetable and Carne — I selected the Carne (\$13.50), though I wished for some middle ground — why not offer one with meat AND veggies? (And, for that matter, there's not a whole lot of variance between the vegetable and roasted vegetable options, garlic-herb sauce be darned.) The round pocket arrived with a porthole, the dough golden-brown. The crust, mostly soft, was thin, save for one thick edge where it was sealed. Though some corners were fleeting, the fillings — mozzarella cheese, pepperoni, Canadian bacon and Marzano's house-made sausage — were, for the most part, evenly distributed. The sauce was sweet, and there could've been more of it. Ditto for cheese; every bite should see the cheese stretched to its breaking point. Against the sauce and Canadian bacon, the salty sausage, with a consistency similar to ground beef, evened things out. Still, I longed for a bit of brightness: peppers, onions, hot sauce, etc.

The calzone came with a small Tossed Green Salad, and the mixed baby greens were fresh. Also along for the ride were thin shreds of carrot, red onions and cherry tomatoes. There were two house-made dressings: vinaigrette and ranch, and the counterperson offered me one of each.

The Insalata Grande Salad (\$12.75) uses the Tossed Green Salad as a base before adding sun-dried tomatoes, Niçoise olives, feta crumbles, pine nuts and two pepperoncinis.

(All salads are served with a sliver of chewy focaccia bread.) I split the dressings, ranch on one half and vinaigrette on the other. Though the ranch was a little thin, I appreciated it more than the vinaigrette, whose olive-y essence only exacerbated the bitter, oily Mediterranean-influenced flavors. It needed smoothing, creaminess. The Insalata Grande is offered as a meal, and that's mostly true. The size was nothing to scoff at, but a little more protein — like garbanzo beans or more hearty nuts, for instance — would shore up the foundation.

On a return trip I tried the Caesar (\$7 small / \$10 large). While I enjoyed the flavor, I remain wholly dismayed by the price. The serving was meager and featured little more than romaine lettuce, dressing and a sprinkling of parmesan cheese (and a sliver of focaccia). There were no croutons, no lemon to squeeze — just a bowl of damp lettuce. Again,



The Combo Traditional is loaded with mozzarella, provolone, pepperoni, sausage, onions, mushrooms, black olives and green peppers.

the dressing was fine: an even mix of lemon, garlic and anchovy, none speaking louder than the rest. But I just can't reconcile the price. We're talking about lettuce. And we're also talking about presentation.

But this is, after all, a pizza joint, and salads won't make or break it. To that end, Marzano's cruises straight down Main street. It's not old-fashioned, doughy or greasy, nor is it boutique-y, artisan or innovative. It's a medium-thin crust with wholly acceptable, largely familiar ingredients that won't bowl you over. Marzano's offers two sauces: tomato and garlic-herb olive oil. They also have a gluten-free crust (available on small pizzas only).

With standard crust and their standard to-

mato sauce, the Combo Traditional (10-inches \$15.75; 14-inches \$25; 18-inches \$31), pretty much brought the house with mozzarella, provolone, pepperoni, sausage, onions, mushrooms, black olives and green peppers. Between the salty meats and sweet sauce and bright veggies, there was balance. The toppings went nearly to the edge, and the crust was crisp. Nothing to scoff at, though nothing to write home about either.

I had the Roasted Vegetable (10-inches \$15; 14-inches \$23.75; 18-inches \$31) on gluten-free crust (add \$1.50, only available in small). Instead of tomato sauce, it came with garlic-herb olive oil sauce, which I found to be rather minimalistic: more of a hint or subtle spice than a base. The roasted veggies — red peppers, zucchini, onions and tomatoes — were sweet, supple, oily and covered with cheese that was just beginning to brown. The gluten-free crust was crisp on the edge but chewy and seemingly undercooked in the pizza's center. After finishing one small piece, my jaw muscles said hello. While it's an appreciated option for those with restrictions, the gluten-free dough could use a few more tests in the lab. (Perhaps the difficulty of even cooking is what prevents it being used in larger pies?)

There are other pizzas on the menu I feel as if I might as well have already tried as extensions of the calzone (the Carne Amore pizza) and the Insalata Grande (the Roma). In hindsight I would've tried the Smoked Prosciutto Ham instead of the Roasted Vegetable. But nothing in particular is really drawing me back to Marzano's.

In a way, it comes back to the restaurant not selling slices. Size concerns aside, I wonder why Marzano's can't — or won't — make that happen. (Could the calculation be cynical and profit-driven?) Furthermore, why can't I get a Caesar as the side to a calzone? Then there are some odd, seemingly arbitrary discrepancies in price between pizzas and sizes. (Why, for instance, does it sometimes cost more to go from a small to a medium on some pizzas when others cost more to go from medium to large?)

Most of my qualms come down to value. That's what happens when the tastes are acceptable but don't knock your socks off. There are no superb ingredients, surprises, earnest classicism or innovation. Just good ol' pizza — at artisan prices.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • mouth@coastweekend.com

Marzano's Pizza

Rating: ★★ ★

60 Laneda Ave. Manzanita
503-368-3663

HOURS: 4 to 8:30 p.m. Sunday, Monday and Thursday; 4 to 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday

PRICE: \$\$ — the only game in town and it shows.

SERVICE: Slow but cheery, staffed like the bunkhouse for camp counselors

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS: Vegetarians should do well; gluten-free crust is available

DRINKS: Soda, beer and wine

KEY TO RATINGS

- ★ poor
- ★★ below average
- ★★★ good & worth returning
- ★★★★ excellent
- ★★★★★ outstanding, the best in the Columbia-Pacific region