

# Astoria pizza joint delivers classic pies

Review and photos by  
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There's an old joke, and it goes something like this: Sex is like pizza — even when it's bad it's good.

Which isn't to say that Sahara Pizza, a small chain based mostly in Washington, is bad. It's totally fine — good enough to eat a slice even when you aren't really hungry because, hey, it's pizza.

When it comes to slices, though, Sahara doesn't bother. What a bummer. Instead, the restaurant offers an 8-inch personal pie that starts at \$5.50 with plain cheese and goes up from there (at \$.75 per topping). Whether or not you feel the personal pizza is an adequate substitute — and I don't — the slice's allure is that it's quick; a brief re-heat and you're out the door. Not so much when you're starting with raw dough.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there's the enormous 28-inch Sahara Size, whose box is as big as a card table. It seems like a novelty, and at \$45 for just cheese I'm not sure it's a better deal than two large 16-inch pies (at \$21.99 each). That kind of math, though, what with circumference and surface areas and, you know, Pi, is above the Mouth's pay grade.

On one of my trips I witnessed a family gathered around the gargantuan thing. As they left, the teenage son carried it out, the box in one hand, two-liter bottle of soda in the other. He struggled to get out the door, as the box was just about as wide as the frame. As the box began to tilt, sliding from his grip, the Mouth sprang to action, saving pounds of pizza from piling onto the floor. Indeed, when math ain't your thing, you have to find other ways to be valuable.

The restaurant itself is pretty understated. A checkered floor, some booths, tables and rock radio underneath high ceilings. Appropriately staffed with teenagers and

young adults, Sahara is bustling with the churn of delivery drivers coming and going. It's also, quite conveniently, next door to the sprawling and delightful Video Horizons. There's even a rear entrance through Sahara — you can browse videos while you wait.

Pizza, meanwhile, is essentially as good as its crust. Sahara's is soft and thick, not quite deep-dish, but close. They're doughy, a tad floppy and not too crisp, laden with cheese and pretty greasy. Besides building your own, Sahara offers a number of Gourmet pies (8-inch \$7.99, 12-inch \$15.99, 14-inch \$18.99, 16-inch \$21.99). Then there are specials, like two 12-inch pizzas with three toppings each for \$20.99, or two 14-inchers with two toppings each.

A counterperson pointed me toward the Sahara from the Gourmet menu. With marinara sauce, onions, green bell peppers, pepperoni, mushrooms, Italian sausage and shredded mozzarella cheese, it was the typical "supreme." The veggies were cut small, and there weren't too many of them. The chunks of Italian sausage, on the other hand, were bulbous, the size of large marbles.

The Firebird paired smooth creaminess from ranch sauce and mozzarella against bright, pointy spice from jalapeños, Franks Red Hot sauce and buffalo chicken. Gorgonzola added a flaky texture, but the sharp tang was the overriding sensation.

From the vegetarian pies I tried the Pumba and Jungle Veggie, both of which were quite similar with bitter artichoke hearts and pungent olives out front. The differences were underneath — the Pumba with feta and a mild basil pesto sauce, the Jungle Veggie with alfredo.

I had both on gluten-free crust,



**Top:** This pizza is half Firebird, left, and half Sahara.

**Left:** The Italian grinder sandwich featured marinara, salami, pepperoni, mozzarella and sweet ham.

which was thankfully offered at no extra charge. The pre-made crust was another step in the right direction toward gluten-freedom. It was thin, barely chewy, and crisp. Indeed, we're getting there. Haven't arrived yet, but it's promising. That said, when I returned, I wasn't ready to give up the traditional crust.

On it I had two of the more reaching, experimental pies on Sahara's otherwise familiar menu — the Caribbean Crunch and the Northwest Territory.

The Caribbean Crunch comfortably split the difference between savory and sweet with sun-dried tomato pesto, garlic, feta and mozzarella cheeses, with barbecue chicken. Thinly shaved almonds added texture and a nutty finish. Cubes of mango seemed to melt away in my mouth.

The Northwest Territory wasn't quite as successful. Rather, it

seemed to have a bit of identity crisis, trying to be too many things at once. With apples and walnuts, dusted with cinnamon, it would've made a fine, hearty, sweet alternative. But the mozzarella cheese, pesto and onions went in the other direction. Something like a goat cheese would've been preferable. It was almost there. A minor tune-up and it could really be something. Then again, basic pizzas — your pepperonis, cheeses, Hawaiians and the like — are where Sahara seems to make hay. A wood-fired, artisan joint this is not.

Besides pies, Sahara offers salads, breadsticks, grinders, pastas and wings. While the counterperson recommended the pizza above all else, I dabbled. The salads are all lettuce heavy. Five of the six have a romaine base. The outlier is iceberg. I tried the Caesar (\$4.99 / small), which did the trick with a dressing heavy on cream, light on fishiness. However, I despised the addition of

## SAHARA PIZZA

Rating: ★★★

740 Astor St., Astoria  
503-325-0500

**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.  
Sunday through Thursday;  
11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and  
Saturday.

**PRICE:** \$ – Not unreasonable,  
look for specials.

**SERVICE:** Young, jovial and  
competent.

**VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OP-  
TIONS:** A few vegetarian pies  
and gluten-free crust.

**DRINKS:** Soda, beer, bottled  
sports and energy drinks.

### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Below average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Best in region

black olives.

I was impressed with the size of the grinder; cut in two, it was nearly a foot long altogether. I had the Italian (\$8.99), with marinara, salami, pepperoni, mozzarella and sweet ham. Cooked in the pizza oven, the bread was perfect, a crisp, golden crust, soft on the inside. While one could add lettuce and tomato for an extra dollar, what the sandwich really could've used is onions and bell peppers.

I also tried the Traditional Chicken Wings (\$4.99, 1/2 pound), opting for Firewalkers sauce. When I opened the container the steam from the sauce singed my nostrils. It turned out to be Franks Red Hot and little, if anything, else. The six wings were moderately sized, with a soft skin. They aren't something you'd go out of your way for, but as an addition to a delivery order for a party or football game snacking, they'd certainly pass muster.

The same can be of Sahara in general. I mean, it's pizza!