

A Mano Demo Offers 'Slice of Naples'

Pizzeria A Mano of Franklin Avenue hosts well known Italian restaurateurs March 6.

By [Alex Savvides](#) | [Email the author](#) | 6:00am

In a culinary world increasingly focused on modern and fusion cuisines, a village restaurant exposed patrons to an old world dining experience Saturday.

Ridgewood's [A Mano](#) held two demonstrations March 6 on the time-tested techniques of classic Neapolitan pizza makers, leaving seminar attendees better educated, and of course, well fed.

Saturday's sessions were a celebration Naples's food and history, with A Mano restaurant owner Fred Mortati hosting fourth-generation Italian pizza maker Antonio Starita and, Antonino Esposito, also of Naples.

Mortati, also a food importer with Italian connections, said it was his emotional connection to the food and culture of Naples that drove him to open a pizza restaurant in Ridgewood.

"The way this place developed was a passion for Neapolitan pizza that I developed traveling to this area," Mortati said. "I said to my wife, 'If we could bring the flavor back not to the city, but the suburbs of New Jersey, our neighbors would love it.' Every single thing in this place came from Naples. We built a Neapolitan stove, we have the Neapolitan products."

Esposito and Starita sought to give their roughly 40 guests a glimpse into modern pizza's history with an amusing anecdote about pizza's introduction to Italy's Queen Margarita in the 1700s.

"Pizza was a peasant food," Starita said through Mortati's translation. "Queen Margarita wanted to reach out to her constituency" by being seen eating pizza, and the pizza maker selected to prepare a pizza for her, Genarro Esposito, wanted to introduce the queen to a pizza the colors of the Italian flag. The solution was to take the revolutionary step of introducing cheese to the pizza, creating the Margarita pizza.

"It's named after the first guy to really take this step of putting cheese on it."

A Mano's guest pizza makers had the same concentration on pleasing their patrons that Genarro Esposito had for Queen Margarita those many years ago. "I want to see if everybody like it because that will be the final judgment," Mortati said. "It's what you like."

Restaurant patrons used to having their food prepared in a back kitchen had a chance to learn the process of pizza making from start to finish on Saturday—and they were encouraged to learn with their taste buds.


Mortati gave the diners a first-hand introduction into the many ingredients and dishes, sending around samples of cooked dough, cheese, and finished Neapolitan pizza. Much of the demonstration focused on the technique of pizza dough preparation.

"He can do with three fingers what the rest of us do with 10," Mortati said of Starita's kneading technique.

Third-generation pizza flour maker Antimo Caputo of Naples, Italy, had nothing but praise for the authenticity of the pizza making techniques on display at A Mano on Saturday. "When I'm here, it's a slice of Naples," Caputo said. "This place is very familiar. I feel at home."

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