

Fired Up... it's Italian

Classic Pizzeria Offers Neapolitan Cuisine

Anyone walking down Main Avenue the morning of Sept. 22, 2012, witnessed an unusual sight: eight men moving a three-and-a-half-ton oven onto a forklift. The oven then traveled three blocks to its new home at 741 Main, where the old Hell Bent Leather's entire front wall had been removed to accommodate its entrance.

The decision to semi-demolish the fronts of two buildings in order to move a wood-fired oven three blocks is less impetuous than it might seem. If the hearth is the heart of the home, then the wood-fired oven surely is the soul of the restaurant, especially this Italian-style pizzeria, Fired Up. Owner Tad Brown is a pizzaiolo (a genuine, certified pizza specialist) who trained to make authentic Neapolitan pizza with the Verace Pizza Napoletana Association. Later, he hired the Ferrara family in Naples, Italy, to spend three months crafting a special oven for him out of lava from Mt. Vesuvius. After traveling via boat, train, truck and forklift to Durango, three more blocks seemed a small price to pay for an oven that reaches 900 degrees Fahrenheit and cooks a pizza in roughly 90 seconds.

Truly, the new Fired Up Pizzeria centers around this oven. The design of the long, wooden bar even points to it. The new, larger space is a welcome change from the pizzeria's first Durango location, which was so tiny (occupancy: 12) that patrons often had to wait in long lines out the door – for a restaurant without table service. The new location (occupancy: 77 plus patio seating) is brightly lit, with friendly servers bustling to bring salads, pizzas and libations from the full bar to typically smiling customers.

And it's no wonder they're smiling. Fired Up's menu is faithful to the principles of Neapolitan cuisine, using fresh, whole foods and traditional cooking methods, including, of course, a wood-fired oven.

"We hand-roll our dough, we purée our sauce; I can give anyone my ingredients on one hand – we stick to that heritage," Brown says.

The crusts are thin, rolled to the thinness of a credit card. Offerings range from classics like the Margherita or Pesto to the Bianca Prosciutto, a white pizza with Italian ham, arugula and shaved



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Parmesan cheese, or the delicious Wifey, with kalamata olives, sautéed onions, fresh basil and mushrooms – created by Brown’s wife and co-owner, Vilma.

The Browns, who have lived all over the world, settled in Durango because, says Vilma, it seemed like the perfect place to raise their two sons. Tad grew up in Salt Lake City, and Vilma was raised in Lithuania; the two met working in restaurants in Girdwood, Alaska. They married in 2006. Vilma Brown says their sons – Connor, 6, and Mason, 3 – love the food at Fired Up and pretend to be pizza makers at home.

“Sometimes at school they get pizza for lunch and they kind of compare – I think they’ve gotten a little spoiled by having our pizzas,” she laughs.

Both Browns agree: quality is key. While some ingredients come from Italy, such as the San Marzano tomatoes and hand-milled flour, most of the produce they use is sourced from local farmers, while their mozzarella is made on the premises. Fired Up offers gluten-free crusts and vegan cheese for those with special requests.

Durango resident Ron Walden has been a devotee of Fired Up’s food since the Browns started out with a pizza cart at Durango’s farmers market in 2010.

“I like to go to the best pizza places around. I’ve been to New York and tried their pizzas; there’s a place that’s famous in Phoenix called Pizzeria Bianco; there’s Mozza in Los Angeles. I like Fired Up as well as the famous places, if not better,” he says.

Fired Up Pizzeria is open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily at 741 Main Ave. in Durango. www.fireduppizzeria.com ■



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Durango-based journalist Jen Reeder has traveled – and eaten – around the world.