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Five minutes with... Stefano Manfredi

17 Nov 2014

PizzAperta, Stefano Manfredi's flash new pizzeria at The Star, swings open its doors this Thursday. On the eve of its launch, the Italian culinary icon sits down with foodService and talks pre-industrial flours, Italy's new-breed pizza makers and his second venue at the famed Sydney casino.

You have a fine diner at Manfredi at Bells at Killcare and a chic osteria with Balla at The Star. Was a casual pizzeria always in the horizon?

I've always been fascinated with pizza, but I started taking a greater interest in it a few years back when I did a pizza tour of Italy. We went to ground zero for pizza, which is Naples, but I also wanted to see what Italians were doing outside of Naples, things that were innovative.

I met a wonderful young pizzaiolo, Antonio Pappalardo, up north in Brescia where he has a pizzeria. I guess he epitomises the new breed of pizza maker in that they've gone back and looked at basic ingredients – particularly the flours, which are very important. And that's where it all began.

What makes the flour all-important?

Antonio introduced me to stone-ground flours, and in particular the Petra range at the Molino Quaglia mill in Padova.

Stone-ground flour has all the nutrients and enzymes, all the goodies. A lot of times when you have a pizza, it sits in your stomach. That's because the flour that's used is highly refined.

When you make dough with a stone-ground flour, it rises in a different way – it rises in a way that the bugs in the yeast that eat the sugars do it more slowly over a longer period of time. The extra time breaks down all those things in wheat that usually make it hard to digest.

There's also the taste that the flour and a 13-hour fermentation process we use produces. This is what really excited me about where young Italians are taking pizza in Italy and what we're doing at PizzAperta.

How radically different a pizza are we talking?

You have to understand that Neapolitan style is what's seen as real pizza. In Naples, they use caputo flour. Anyone who models themselves on the classic Naples style here in Australia is using caputo.

We're doing our pizzas with an eye on Neapolitan style with a round shape and a lovely cornice on the edge. We're also cooking them in a wood-fired oven. But we're trying to get back to the roots of pre-industrial flour milling.

What about the toppings – will they be authentic or inspired?

We have three sections on the menu. There'll be the classics: the margheritas, calzones, marinaras, etc. Then there's the seasonal and 'new-wave' flavours, with combinations like beautiful asparagus, roast tomatoes and parmesan, or slow-roasted lamb belly. The latter is very much Australian – we're here, so why not! Lastly, there's the Roman-style, which are square pizzas, like focaccias, that are warmed up in an electric oven.

From an operations viewpoint, what are the pros and cons of working within a casino?

The support. For example, our special mixer from Italy hasn't arrived, but we can do all our doughs in the fully equipped pastry kitchen. On our own we'd be sweating and wouldn't open on time. Then there's the volume of people that are attracted to The Star. For a pizzeria – for any restaurant – that's essential. Not to mention all the publicity and marketing.

Come Thursday, you'll have three on the go. How do you manage multiple venues?

I'm just glad that they're all in the same city! It would be a lot more difficult if they were spread across Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, for example, let alone overseas. I know David Chang quite well and he spends a lot of time traveling between New York, now Toronto and here in Sydney at The Star. It's tough.

I'm lucky to be able to spend a couple of days a week at each venue and I work a lot with people over the phone or email. The trick is to have fantastic people working for you who know what your standards are and what you expect.

And the name, PizzAperta?

It's a combination of two words – pizza and *aperta*, meaning 'open'. It's the same root word for *apertivo*. It's like an opening to a meal.

PIZZAPERTA

The Star Sydney, Ground Floor, 80 Pirrama Road Pyrmont
Tuesday – Saturday 11:30am to 10pm, Sunday 11:30am-5pm

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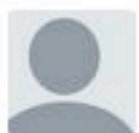
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Antonio Pappalardo, Stefano Manfredi and PizzAperta head chef Gianluca Donzelli

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