



LET THEM EAT... PIZZA

BY OLIVIER BJÖRKSÄTER-BLEYLOCK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN SYMONS

In her *Classic Italian Cookbook*, Marcella Hazan wrote: "There exist few things that are absolutely perfect, some of which nature has bestowed on man, and others that man has produced all by himself. There is no way to improve the form and function of the egg. Nor upon the taste of the genuine Neapolitan pizza."

Well, in our hour of financial need, it appears the good old pizza is proving to be a comforting choice once more. Whether you like it thin or thick, classic or stuffed, delivered or picked up, or even popping out of the toaster (God forbid!), pizza is a major comfort food. It's convenient, affordable, filling and appeals to all ages and ethnicities. So, I recently went in search of the pièce de résistance of all pizzas among the long list of pizzerias that proliferate in our city centres across New South Wales.

Domino's and Pizza Hut, the dominant main delivery brands, have both reported a sales surge which they put down to the recession scaring people into staying in more (although I find that a little hard to swallow after tasting their pizzas). But my tour of our most widely available pizza restaurants revealed that those people brave enough to spend money at them seem to be flocking to them in droves, possibly clutching the two-for-one vouchers that have been printed in newspapers or on the back of cinema tickets lately. However, I soon discovered that even the independent high-quality pizzerias had queues around the block. At my local I was informed that they were down to their last two pizza bases, mid-way through dinner service.

So, I went in search of Hazan's culinary masterpiece, which, she said, should consist of "a crisp, clean" base that's "cracklingly crunchy" with a "faintly sour, yeasty taste," specifying that the "bufala mozzarella must have the smoothest, melt in your mouth texture" and the "tomatoes for the topping are simply tomatoes, not a sweetish sauce." These should, she demands, be plum tomatoes so ripe they can be squeezed onto the base and go into the wood-fired oven raw. Oh, yes. I wondered how close the pizzas I would sample would get to Hazan's criteria.

Truth be told, I didn't actually have to venture very far to find the perfect pizza. It's the kind of pizza that would even have Marcella Hazan finally convinced that recipes have moved on from their original function of showing where the housekeeping money had gone. So, where is it and what makes it so special? It's *Pizzeria Bellucci*, located in the visually grand and ornately designed *La Piazza* at the Bankstown Sports Club. For a truly authentic and richly flavoursome pizza, there is no place like *Pizzeria*

Bellucci where the pizzas are made right before your eyes in a rustic wood fire style oven whilst your free to soak up the flavours of Italy in the atrium as you sip on a Campari aperitif from the bar.

Our charismatic host, Mario Libertin, has over 27 years experience creating authentic Italian tastes in some of Sydney's most loved Italian restaurants, and the proof is in his pizzas at *Pizzeria Bellucci*. But what makes these pizzas the twenty-four carat Oscars of all pizzas is in its maker – 18-year-old pizzaiolo Riccardo Moretti who recently won the award for *Best Traditional Pizza Maker* in the state final of the *Dairy Farmers Best of the Best Pizza Challenge*, representing New South Wales as he captivated visitors to the *Good Food and Wine Show*.

This isn't anything new for Moretti, who's a seasoned pro after winning the state final last year too, but this time he's got his eyes firmly set on the national title, which if he wins will see him walk away with a range of prizes including a stack of cash, a big, shiny trophy, and wide range of a expensive sponsors goodies. There's also the opportunity to venture to Las Vegas to compete in the *International Pizza Challenge* at the *International Pizza Expo*.

The young and very talented pizza boy, who credits his brother Michael Moretti for his success (and who also works at *Pizzeria Bellucci*), has an ambitious dream of one day opening his own chain of gourmet pizza stores, but for the moment he's got his eyes on the national prize.

The national finals will be competed for over two days this month during *Fine Food Australia* in Sydney. There are 10 finalists (5 traditional including Moretti and 5 gourmet pizza makers), who will all face a black box challenge. They will need to impress the judges by making the best pizza they can by selecting toppings and other ingredients at the show. So, what's the catch? They won't know what they can choose from until an hour before they have to start cooking them.

In years gone by the national winner has been chosen based on a simple points decision. Whoever had the most from either the best overall traditional or gourmet side was declared the annual national *Best of the Best*. But this year they will both hit one final hurdle in their race to become the champion. Once the pair has been decided, the judges will give the winners a list of ingredients they must use and 30 minutes to plan and 20 minutes to prepare and cook the pizza that will win one of them this year's title. As Marcella Hazan always says, "Pizza is made for improvisation and brooks no dogmas about its toppings." Best of luck, Riccardo! ■