

THE RIGHT SLICE

Simple yet complex all at once, artisanal pizza is on the rise in local restaurants.

By Allison Hata | Photos by Edgar Obrand

GONE ARE THE DAYS OF OIL-SOAKED PAPER plates filled with greasy masses of extra cheese and pepperoni (and extra calories)—this is the era of the pizza renaissance, a grand movement in which handcrafted gourmet pizzas take center stage. In Laguna, pizza is an experience not to be forgotten, with each restaurant offering its unique take on this culinary staple. Whether they specialize in pizza or just feature an amazing array of artisan options on the menu, these eateries will treat diners to the perfect pie.

Z PIZZA

Z Pizza may be a popular chain that spans the country today, but it all started with one restaurant in Laguna more than 25 years ago. Fresh, organic ingredients are key in Z Pizza's offerings, which include pizzas using vegan cheese and gluten-free crust. Take your taste buds on a culinary tour of the world with the international rusticas: flat pizzas shaped like naan that feature lighter cheese and gourmet ingredients like roasted eggplant, pine nuts and basil pesto (Moroccan)

or artichoke hearts, roasted peppers and Greek olives (Mediterranean). While the eatery is currently operating out of its Crystal Cove location, it has plans to reopen in Laguna at the end of May, taking over the old Animal Crackers building. (949-499-4949; zpizza.com)

NEAPOLITAN PIZZERIA AND BIRRERIA

Relatively new in Laguna, Neapolitan Pizzeria has already made its way into the hearts of pizza lovers around town with its locally-



Mediterranean rustica from Z Pizza



Neapolitan Pizzeria and Birreria

sourced ingredients and simple crusts, slightly charred to perfection. Fired in a wood-burning Stefano Ferrara Napoli oven, a slice of the Nea Meatball—veal meatballs, ricotta, organic pomodoro sauce and marjoram—goes great with the restaurant's California microbrew selection. Vegetarians will enjoy the meatless, no-cheese Il Mercato pizza, which combines marinated kale, spinach and lemon with a fluffy Neapolitan-style crust for a zesty taste sensation. (949-499-4531; nealaguna.com)

ZÉYTOON

With a signature Mediterranean flair, Zéytoon's flatbread-style pizzas provide a fresh, global alternative to other offerings in town. The manaeesh features an oregano thyme spread mixed with olive oil on flatbread—cheese is optional for those who prefer lighter or vegan fare. The thin-crust pizza also offers a taste of the Mediterranean with herb-marinated and oven-roasted eggplant, green and red bell peppers, onions, sundried tomatoes, roasted asparagus mousse and prosciutto sprinkled with Gorgonzola cheese and arugula leaves. Be sure to try the flatbread—a blend of marinated green olives, herbs, light mozzarella and green peppers

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Left: Alessa's pizza piccante; right: Pizza Lounge's coconut shrimp



Sausage pizza in the wood burning oven at Wine Gallery

MORE PIZZA

ANASTASIA CAFE:

949-497-8903; anastasiaboutique.com

ANGELINA'S PIZZERIA, DANA POINT:

949-429-1102;

angelinaspizzerianapoletana.com

BJ'S RESTAURANT AND BREWERY:

949-494-3802; bjsrestaurants.com

GINA'S PIZZA:

949-497-4421 (north);

949-494-4342 (south); ginaspizza.com

MARO WOOD GRILL:

949-793-4044; marowoodgrill.com

OCEAN AVENUE RESTAURANT AND

BREWERY:

949-497-3381; oceanbrewing.com

ROMEO CUCINA:

949-497-6627; romeocucina.com

that's both light and decadent at the same time. (949-715-9230; zeytooncafe.com)

ALESSÁ LAGUNA BEACH

In this Italian trattoria, enjoy pizza as it's meant to be tasted. Chef-owner Alessandro Pirozzi creates his menu of specialty pizzas with light, authentic ingredients. Enjoy the kick of spicy Italian sausage and salami with arrabbiata sauce in the pizza Piccante, or try the Funghi Misti, featuring wild mixed mushrooms, fontina cheese and white truffle oil. No matter what you order, the thin crust gourmet pizzas offer a flavorful sauce, fresh mozzarella and a flaky, crisp texture with every bite. (714-969-2148; pirozziculinary.com)

WINE GALLERY WINE BAR & KITCHEN

One of Laguna's newest additions on the restaurant scene, Wine Gallery Wine Bar & Kitchen

features a wood-fired oven and a full kitchen. Wines play a starring role on this menu, but for those in the know—and others lucky enough to get a recommendation from owner and co-founder Chris Olsen—the pizza is the hottest thing out of the oven. Featuring a thin crust and house-made mozzarella, all of Wine Gallery's pizzas are mouthwatering creations. The sausage pizza comes highly recommended by Chris and doesn't disappoint with a sweet and savory blend of fennel sausage with caramelized fennel and onions. (949-715-8744; winegallerylaguna.com)

PIZZA LOUNGE

A pizza mecca, the Pizza Lounge on Coast Highway has a seemingly endless list of out-of-the-ordinary creations. Pop in on your way to the beach and grab a slice to go: On any given day, choose from an array of options, including a chicken, peach and Gorgonzola pizza. Not to be missed for seafood lovers is the coconut shrimp pizza, a unique combination of garlic Alfredo sauce and mozzarella cheese, shrimp, shredded coconut and tomatoes. (949-497-2277; pizzalounges.com)

If you find yourself craving the perfect slice, please your palate with a trip to one of these local eateries, where even the pickiest pizza connoisseur will find something to his or her liking. With options that run the gamut from traditional toppings like pepperoni to obscure flavors like shrimp and coconut, these restaurants all have one thing in common—an unwavering dedication to delivering handcrafted pizzas worthy of the “artisanal” moniker. **LBM**