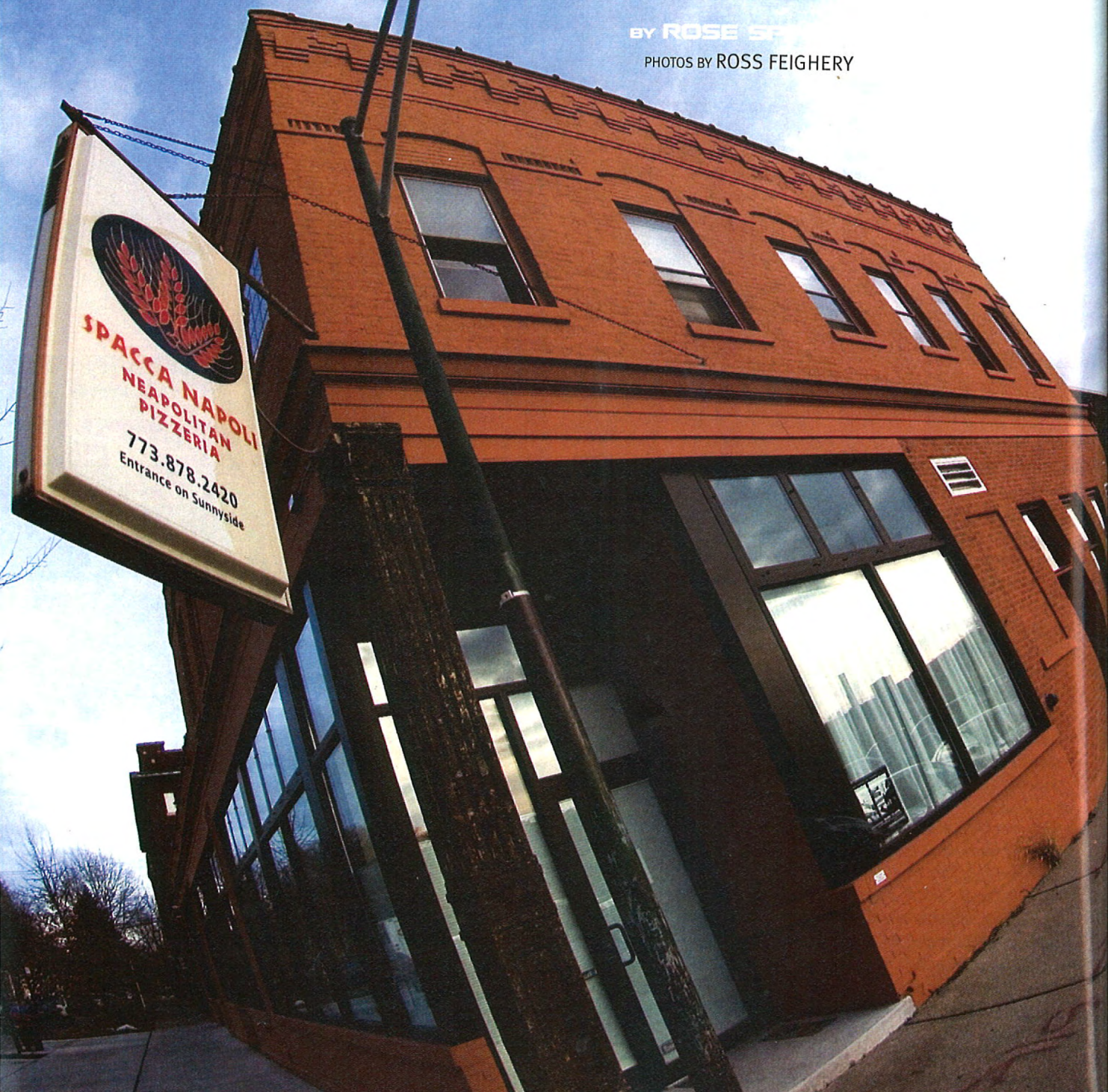


ITALIA HO!

WITH MOUTHWATERING PIZZA, RARE BEER AND ONE REALLY HOT OVEN, JONATHAN GOLDSMITH PROVES "ITALIAN" ISN'T JUST A HERITAGE—IT'S A WAY OF LIFE.

BY ROSE STREIBER

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Above: Spacca Napoli's signature pizza waits to be sliced. **Below:** Goldsmith proudly poses with a pie and a Menabrea beer.

Lonathan Goldsmith spins around, big-eyed. "Want to watch me make dough?" We are in the bowels of Goldsmith's year-old pride and joy, Spacca Napoli Pizzeria, which sits on a bustle-free corner shared by a commuter rail line in Chicago's fast-growing Ravenswood neighborhood.

Like most who've walked through the door since its 2006 Valentine's Day opening, it's been a Neapolitan-style love affair. The source of affection is the wood-burning oven that fires up to 1,200 degrees, making pies in about a minute and producing a flavor so authentic that one letter-writing native was compelled to say, "*La tua pizza mi ha fatto piagere.*" Your pizza made me cry.

It's lunchtime, I'm half crazed by the aromas and the prospect of observing dough making seems as fulfilling as watching paint dry. With the reverence of a docent, Goldsmith has been pointing out the ingredients that produce the signature flavors. He escorts me in and out of walk-in coolers to behold his



fresh bufala and fior di latte mozzarellas. I'm within pilfering distance of shelves lined with Castelvetro olives, Alici Marinate (marinated fresh anchovies) and San Marzano tomatoes—all imported—and am forced to squeeze past kitchen workers industriously assembling partial ingredients for tonight's mise en place: paper-thin slices of prosciutto di Parma.

Relief rings hopeful when Goldsmith stops in his tracks, distracted by stacked cases of his latest menu-item acquisition, Birra Bionda Menabrea. Maybe he'll crack open a couple. "For three years I looked all over for this beer," which would date it to a time when Spacca was still a twinkle in Goldsmith's eye. "When I finally found a distributor I said, 'Give me twenty cases.'" It's a standing order.

Alas, no beer is forthcoming. Yet. But I do learn about its provenance. Menabrea was recently introduced to the American market and is a three-time gold medal winner at the World Beer Championships for "best pale lager." Despite its acclaim, however, the beer is still relatively obscure in America. The brewery, which is celebrating its 150th year and is the oldest brewery to have survived foreign company domination, is located in Biella, a small town in Italy's Piedmont region. "Some say it resembles a Slavic Urquell," Goldsmith says, unconsciously stroking the boxes. This would make sense since the hops used are Saaz, commonly grown in the Czech Republic. "But I wanted it here because it's the closest thing out there to an artisanal beer."

Spacca Napoli is all about recreating a time when people knew their brewers, bakers and pizza makers. Even its name is steeped in tradition. *Spaccanapoli*, which means "split Naples" in dialect, refers to the market street that divides the old quarter of the city. It's where Goldsmith would spend three years on and off, taken under the wing of respected pizzeria De Matteo.

By now, swept into the vortex of Goldsmith's enthusiasm, the climate-controlled room where the imported dough making machine toils is even beginning to feel oddly exciting. The mixing mimics human arm motions for optimal dough which will be extended by hand, not thrown, for the desired supple texture: thin in the center with airy-thick edges. I'm fantasizing it's the kind that's perfect for folding and wolfing.

How does a trained clinical therapist turned real estate developer become a certified *pizzaiuolo*, or pizza maker? "I always thought of doing something in the service industry," he recalls. "But ultimately, this was my calling, something that was meant to happen."

In the 1980s Goldsmith, his artist wife Ginny Sykes and two-year-old daughter Sarah



moved to Florence where Sykes studied painting. They returned three years later. "I was doing real estate, but I didn't love it," he says. To keep his finger in social work and to satisfy the yen he'd developed abroad for cooking, Goldsmith found a unique café right around the corner from their Uptown home that fulfilled both needs. Inspiration Café is a nonprofit restaurant that serves the homeless home-cooked meals while supporting them toward gaining employment and housing. Goldsmith became a fixture there, becoming the volunteer cook, sharpening his culinary

Above: Prepping dough for a masterpiece.

Opposite, from top: A perfect pie escapes the heat; An employee mans the oven; Birra Bionda Menabrea.

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The real estate market had taken a downturn and he was looking for something new. He began shuttling back and forth from Naples, where pizza is said to have originated, often staying in hostels, and learning the art of making la vera pizza. After “exhaustive research” Goldsmith decided to import 13,500 pounds of oven-building materials and brought over third- and fourth-generation artisans to assemble it. It took ten days and their method is top secret. “If it wasn’t for this”—now he’s massaging the oven—“we’d be just another pizza joint.”

The interconnections continue. “The building was funded by Ginny’s Aunt Rose,” Goldsmith says. “She was an artist living in the East Village” whom Sykes visited as a child and considered a mentor. The Goldsmiths cared for her until her death. Half of the building is devoted to Sykes’ art gallery, but she’s available for special commissions. Most significantly, she and two collaborators designed a mosaic on the oven’s façade made of Venetian glass.

But Goldsmith, who always looks like he could use a nap, needed help. So he went knocking at Inspiration Café, eventually hiring the formerly homeless Keith Will. “It’s been great,” Goldsmith says. “He’s my right-hand man. But, look, it’s not like I’m just this altruistic guy. We who have volunteered at the café have also benefited.” Will’s title is now “kitchen executive.”

Finally, lunch. The Menabrea arrives cold, the flavor hitting both sweet and bitter notes, and has a healthy head. Eyes closed, I take a bite of the pizza and, cheaper than airfare, I am transported to Napoli. ●

skills—the first step in sealing his fate.

The family returned almost yearly to Italy, but it was on the return flight in 2004 that the idea really took shape. Goldsmith, paging through the Chicago Sun-Times, ran across an article for which he’d been interviewed a month earlier. It was about volunteerism and featured a photo of him, which he fatefully showed to his seatmate who happened to own a pizzeria in Little Italy, New York. “He said, ‘You cook? Why don’t you open a pizzeria?’”

Goldsmith took the suggestion seriously.