

The Best Pizza in The World

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I met a young Australian girl last week who was backpacking through Europe for the first time in her life. I gave her directions to the train station. She was heading up to Slovenia, just to check it out. When I heard her plans, I was stricken with such a dumb spasm of jealousy, thinking, I want to go to Slovenia! How come I never get to travel anywhere?

Now, to the innocent eye it might appear that I already am traveling. And longing to travel while you are already traveling is, I admit, a kind of greedy madness. It's kind of like fantasizing about having sex with your favorite movie star while you're having sex with your other favorite movie star. But the fact that this girl asked directions from me (clearly, in her mind, a civilian) suggests that I am not technically traveling in Rome, but living here. However temporary it may be, I am a civilian. When I ran into the girl, in fact, I was just on my way to pay my electricity bill, which is not something travelers worry about. Traveling-to-a-place energy and living-in-a-place energy are two fundamentally different energies, and something about meeting this Australian girl on her way to Slovenia just gave me such a jones to hit the road.

And that's why I called my friend Sofie and said, "Let's go down to Naples for the day and eat some pizza!"

Immediately, just a few hours later, we are on the train, and then-like magic-we are there. I instantly love Naples. Wild, raucous, noisy, dirty, balls-out Naples. An anthill inside a rabbit warren, with all the exoticism of a Middle Eastern bazaar and a touch of New Orleans voodoo. A tripped,out, dangerous and cheerful nuthouse. My friend Wade came to Naples in the 1970s and was mugged ... in a museum. The city is all decorated with the laundry that hangs from every window and dangles across every street; every' body's fresh-washed undershirts and brassieres flapping in the wind like Tibetan prayer flags. There is not a street in Naples in which some tough little kid in shorts and mismatched socks is not screaming up from the sidewalk to some other tough little kid on a rooftop nearby. Nor is there a building in this town that doesn't have at least one crooked old woman seated at her window, peering suspiciously down at the activity below.

The people here are so insanely psyched to be from Naples, and why shouldn't they be? This is a city that gave the world pizza and ice cream. The Neapolitan women in particular are such a gang of tough-voiced, loud,mouthed, generous, nosy dames, all bossy and annoyed and right up in your face and just trying to friggin' help you for chrissake, you dope-why they gotta do everything around here? The accent in Naples is like a friendly cuff on the ear. It's like walking through a city of short,order cooks,

everybody hollering at the same time. They still have their own dialect here, and an ever-changing liquid dictionary of local slang, but somehow I find that the Neapolitans are the easiest people for me to understand in Italy. Why? Because they want you to understand, damn it. They talk loud and emphatically, and if you can't understand what they're actually saying out of their mouths, you can usually pick up the inference from the gesture. Like that punk little grammar school girl on the back of her older cousin's motorbike, who flipped me the finger and a charm'ing smile as she drove by, just to make me understand, "Hey, no hard feelings, lady. But I'm only seven, and I can already tell you're a complete moron, but that's cool-I think you're halfway OK despite yourself and I kinda like your dumb-ass face. We both know you would love to be me, but sorry-you can't. Anyhow, here's my middle finger, enjoy your stay in Naples, and ciao!"

As in every public space in Italy, there are always boys, teenagers and grown men playing soccer, but here in Naples there's something extra, too. For instance, today I found kids-I mean, a group of eight-year-old boys-who had gathered up some old chicken crates to create makeshift chairs and a table, and they were playing poker in the piazza with such intensity I feared one of them might get shot.

[My friends] Giovanni and Dario ... are originally from Naples. I cannot picture it. I cannot imagine shy, studious, sympathetic Giovanni as a young boy amongst this-and I don't use the word lightly-mob. But he is Neapolitan, no question about it, because before I left Rome he gave me the name of a pizzeria in Naples that I had to try, because, Giovanni informed me, it sold the best pizza in Naples. I found this a wildly exciting prospect, given that the best pizza in Italy is from Naples, and the best pizza in the world is from Italy, which means that this pizzeria must offer ... I'm almost too superstitious to say it ... the best pizza in the world? Giovanni passed along the name of the place with such seriousness and intensity, I almost felt I was being inducted into a secret society. He pressed the address into the palm of my hand and said, in gravest confidence, "Please go to this pizzeria. Order the margherita pizza with double mozzarella. If you do not eat this pizza when you are in Naples, please lie to me later and tell me that you did."

So Sofie and I have come to Pizzeria da Michele, and these pies we have just ordered-one for each of us-are making us lose our minds. I love my pizza so much, in fact, that I have come to believe in my delirium that my pizza might actually love me, in return. I am having a relationship with this pizza, almost an affair. Meanwhile, Sofie is practically in tears over hers, she's having a metaphysical crisis about it, she's begging me, "Why do they even bother trying to make pizza in Stockholm? Why do we even bother eating food at all in Stockholm?"

Pizzeria da Michele is a small place with only two rooms and one non-stop oven. It's about a fifteen-minute walk from the train station in the rain, don't even worry about it, just go. You need to get there fairly early in the day because sometimes they run out of dough, which will break your heart.

By 1:00 PM, the streets outside the pizzeria have become jammed with Neapolitans trying to get into the place, shoving for access like they're trying to get space on a lifeboat. There's not a menu. They have only two varieties of pizza here-regular and extra cheese. None of this new age southern California olives-and-sun-dried, tomato wannabe pizza twaddle. The dough, it takes me half my meal to figure out, tastes more like Indian nan than like any pizza dough I ever tried. It's soft and chewy and yielding, but incredibly thin. I always thought we only had two choices in our lives when it came to pizza crust-thin and crispy, or thick and doughy. How was I to have known there could be a crust in this world that was thin and doughy? Holy of holies! Thin, doughy, strong, gummy, yummy, chewy, salty pizza paradise. On top, there is a sweet tomato sauce that foams up all bubbly and creamy when it melts the fresh buffalo mozzarella, and the one sprig of basil in the middle of the whole deal somehow infuses the entire pizza with herbal radiance, much the same way one shimmering movie star in the middle of a party brings a contact high of glamour to everyone around her. It's technically impossible to eat this thing, of course. You try to take a bite off your slice and the gummy crust folds, and the hot cheese runs away like topsoil in a landslide, makes a mess of you and your surroundings, but just deal with it.

The guys who make this miracle happen are shoveling the pizzas in and out of the wood-burning oven, looking for all the world like the boilermen in the belly of a great ship who shovel coal into the raging furnaces. Their sleeves are rolled up over their sweaty forearms, their faces red with exertion, one eye squinted against the heat of the fire and a cigarette dangling from the lips. Sofie and I each order another pie-another whole pizza each-and Sofie tries to pull herself together, but really, the pizza is so good we can barely cope.

A word about my body. I am gaining weight every day, of course. I am doing rude things to my body here in Italy, taking in such ghastly amounts of cheese and pasta and bread and wine and chocolate and pizza dough. (Elsewhere in Naples, I'd been told, you can actually get something called chocolate pizza. What kind of nonsense is that? I mean, later I did go find some, and it's delicious, but honestly-chocolate pizza?) I'm not exercising, I'm not eating enough fiber, I'm not taking any vitamins. In my real life, I have been known to eat organic goat's milk yoghurt sprinkled with wheat germ for breakfast. My real-life days are long gone. Back in America, my friend Susan is telling people I'm on a "No Carb Left Behind" tour. But my body is

being such a good sport about all this. My body is turning a blind eye to my misdoings and my over, indulgences, as if to say, "OK, kid, live it up, I recognize that this is just temporary. Let me know when your little experiment with pure pleasure is over, and I'll see what I can do about damage control."

Still, when I look at myself in the mirror of the best pizzeria in Naples, I see a bright-eyed, clear-skinned, happy and healthy face. I haven't seen a face like that on me for a long time.

"Thank you," I whisper. Then Sofie and I run out in the rain to look for pastries.