

## Pie-Faced

### Pizza guy gets lucky

By Stephen Lemons

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**Pizza *paisanos*:** From left, Pie Zanos co-owner Jayce Elliston, his partner Mike Curtiss, and manager Solomon Von Weimer.

#### **Details**

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**Who / What:**

Pie Zanos Kitchen

**Details:**

Cheeseburger pizza: \$6.75

Bo Diddley pizza: \$6.75

Antipasto: \$6.50

Soup du jour: \$2.95/cup, \$4.95/bowl

602-955-4225.

Hours: Daily, 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

**Where:**

4743 North 20th Street (Town & Country Shopping Center), Phoenix

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Pizza is one of those foods I enjoy too much to actually indulge in very often. Once the feeding frenzy begins in earnest, I'll go through an extra-large pie solo and start on the cardboard box if any cheese has dripped onto it. Keep your hands and feet away from my mouth, and you may avoid injury. Assuming it's not horrid chain-produced pizza like Domino's, I'll consume it until there is no more. I have the same problem with pistachio ice cream and greyhound cocktails, though thankfully not in tandem.

Maybe this is why I initially steered clear of Pie Zanos Kitchen, the 9-month-old joint at the Town & Country Shopping Center back behind Cyprus Pita Grill. Plus, the concept seemed a little shticky, like a low-rent California Pizza Kitchen or a copycat of Sam Fox's Sauce. Of course, what I would eventually learn is that Pie Zanos gives both of those places a culinary wedgie, with pizza that's 20 times better than that of either one. Still, that'd be even more reason for avoidance-therapy on the part of someone like myself, for whom pizza is a form of gustatory crack.

What eventually lured me through Pie Zanos' door was not the pie, but my sense of aesthetics and the promise of cold cucumber soup. You see, the pedestrian side of the cafe is all glass,

and as I was strolling past one afternoon, I happened to notice the artwork of Phoenix painter Jason Rudolph Peña hung on the orange-yellow walls of the interior. I'm a great admirer of Peña's doe-eyed portraits of icons such as Angela Davis, Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka, and the Canadian siren Esthero. So the fact that PZ had hung his work en masse for a May show made me pause for a moment. Then I saw a sign advertising the soup du jour, a chilled cucumber. Considering the heat of the day, cold cucumber potage sounded quite refreshing.

A mint-green purée of Italian cucumbers and potato, made with a vegetable stock and a touch of freshly ground pepper, it was a little like slurping up a cucumber smoothie with a spoon. Soup receives short shrift in this town, and unfairly so. But Pie Zanos is working to correct this discrimination with its mostly homemade soups, including a tomato and roasted pepper mélange, and a gazpacho I've yet to taste. The only time I'd fault PZ is when it relies on the canned variety, as it does with the Italian wedding soup. PZ does such a great job preparing its own, it seems a crime to use a can opener as a crutch.

Seated in the small but comfy eatery, surrounded by Peña's work, and watching the MILFs saunter by outside as I lapped up the last of PZ's cucumber creation, it was only a matter of time before I devoured my first eight-inch pie. The kitchen is open, behind a low wall, and it's there you can select from one of the several house pies or have your own crafted from a wide selection of fresh sauces, meats, cheeses and veggies. Hoping to avoid a binge, I ordered a Tuscan salad along with my Cheeseburger pizza, aiming to offset my mania with a little greenery.

A good salad in this town can be as difficult to find as a shady parking space in mid-August. I often think of *Seinfeld's* Elaine, jonesing for a "big salad," which the character described as "a salad, but with a lot of stuff in it." The irony is that the places that specialize in salads are just the places you'd never want to frequent. You know which ones I'm talking about: cheapo salad buffets where the veggies have spent all day wilting, grub shacks beloved of penny-pinching pensioners and families with the regulation 2.5 kids drooling all over the place. Such rubbish merchants make me want to turn tail and skedaddle faster than Jennifer Wilbanks from a life sentence of matrimony to a Georgia goober.

At PZ, the salads are admirable assemblages of fresh ingredients, each made with a base of mixed greens. To the Tuscan, PZ adds spinach, marinated red peppers, small squares of tofu, Gorgonzola, and sunflower seeds, topped with balsamic vinaigrette. I also scarfed down the antipasto salad with pleasure, this one with salami, ham, pepperoni, pepperoncini, etc. You can also have the salads made to order, along the same lines as the personalized pizzas.

The Tuscan, however, did not allay my ravenous appetite once I took my first bite of the Cheeseburger pizza. With Cheddar, ground beef, mustard and sliced pickle, the Cheeseburger pie effectively mimics its origin. I was especially taken with the thin, delectable crust -- the secret to any great pizza pie. PZ's dough is made every day by Siderno Italian Bakery at North 51st Avenue and West Van Buren Street. Toasted brown by PZ's oven, it's nearly impossible to resist.

From the Cheeseburger, I went on to sample Pie Zanos' eight other specialty pies -- not in one sitting, of course. The most I ate at one time was three individual pies, but in all cases, it was a labor of love. PZ's pies range from tangy to subtle, from the Bo Diddley, with barbecue sauce, bacon, spinach and provolone, to The Natural, with a combo of sliced apple, Alfredo sauce, caramelized onion and poppy seed that could almost pass for dessert.

The Natural is perhaps the most unusual, but it's not at all bad. My preference is for the tangier side of the equation, though, which is why I could eat the Bordertown and the Volcano until my head begins to morph into the shape of a pizza pie. The Bordertown features enchilada sauce, jalapeños, ground beef and salsa, sprinkled over with chili-cheese Fritos.

Spicy, but it's not nearly as hot as the aptly named Volcano, with tangy Buffalo wing sauce, red sauce, sausage, pepper jack cheese and tomatoes.

For breakfast there are frittatas, those briefly baked, open-faced omelets that are like an egg pizza sans dough. Another excellent idea well-executed by PZ partners Mike Curtiss and Jayce Elliston. The pair has a hot concept in Pie Zanos, one based upon doing a few things very well that other, similar spots do poorly, if at all. I can easily see their venture expanding, as will my pants size unless I can force myself to stay away from their pizzeria.

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