Pizza Primavera

I once thought pizza was the most simple, conventional, and un-exciting meal ever. I have since discovered the joy of this rustic, humble, pleasing staple. And it wasn't a trip to Italy that changed my mind; it was a trip to Brooklyn.

When I was attending the CIA (Culinary Institute of America) in New York, I didn't have time or energy to visit the outer boroughs very often. But at the insistence of some fellow chefs-in-waiting on a particularly hot day, we decided to make the trek to Brighton Beach. Being non-natives, we exited the train early and promptly were lost wandering the streets between Midwood and Prospect Park, which seemed like the middle of nowhere. We were hungry and grouchy and stopped at the nearest pizzeria, which seemed fairly popular. Di Fara Pizza. It is and was an unassuming little place, and yet is consistently voted not only the best in Brooklyn but all of New York. Di Fara's inspires fierce devotion in its customers and it's worth it. The pizza is incomparable.

It is in the Naples style, bubbly and crispy at the edges, thin in the middle, and never over-sauced. It is incomparable. This kind of perfection is due in no small part to the fact Mr. DeMarco, the proprietor and the only one on staff allowed to actually handle the dough, uses high-quality ingredients like San Marzano tomatoes and buffalo mozzarella, flown straight from Italy.

That pizza haunted me, long after I left the CIA. When I finally earned my cooking wings, I decided to try to recreate it, with my personal twist of course. Local tomatoes (not imported), local vegetables, and even local cheese. This is the pizza primavera that we serve today. And while it's not a Di Fara pie, it does inspire some fierce devotion of its own.

Pizza Primavera

Dough Ingredients

1 c. warm water  
1 quarter-ounce package active dry yeast  
1 tablespoon honey  
2 to 3 c. bread flour  
½ c. olive oil  
1 tablespoon kosher salt

Scant amount cornmeal

Directions

1. Combine water, yeast, and honey. Stir in ½ cup flour. Cover the bowl, place it in a warm location, and wait until the mixture starts to bubble. This can be 2-6 hours.
2. After the mixture has bubbled, mix in the oil and salt.
3. Add the remaining flour in intervals, until the dough is no longer sticky but not too firm. Not all the flour may be required.
4. Turn the dough onto a floured board and knead for 10 minutes until it becomes smooth and elastic.
5. Return the dough to the bowl, cover, and let rise a second time for about 1 hour.
6. Preheat the over to 450 degrees. Roll dough out with pin to the approximate desired shape. (The very brave can try hand tossing the dough.) If the dough starts to stretch back, wait a few minutes and try again.
7. Place on a pizza stone or baking tray dusted with cornmeal.
8. Add the sauce and toppings and bake 15-20 minutes until bubbly and brown on the edges.

Sauce Ingredients

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
1 yellow onion, finely diced  
1 stalk celery, finely diced  
1 medium carrot, finely diced  
5 cloves garlic, finely minced  
1 bay leaf  
½ teaspoon dried thyme  
½ cup fresh Italian parsley, chopped  
½ cup fresh oregano leaves, chopped  
½ cup fresh basil leaves, chopped      
3 pounds fresh tomatoes   
½ cup red wine  
1 tablespoon tomato paste  
½ teaspoon kosher salt  
½ teaspoon black pepper

Directions

1. Blanche the tomatoes. (Immerse them in boiling water for 15-20 second and then immediately remove.) Let them cool and the skins should peel away easily. Remove most of the seeds and dice.
2. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add onion, celery and carrot, and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender and translucent, about 10 minutes. Add garlic and herbs and cook another 2 to 3 minutes, until tender. Reduce
3. Add the tomatoes, wine, tomato paste, salt and pepper.  Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low, cover and cook 20 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally and crushing tomatoes with a spoon. Thicken sauce by returning to a boil and stirring for the last 5 minutes, allowing excess liquid to be reduced. Serve as is, or blend for a smoother sauce.

Toppings Ingredients

(apply in the following order)

Thinly sliced zucchini, crookneck squash, crimini mushrooms

Roasted red pepper

Shaved red onion

Goat cheese (spread in dollops)

Grated mozzarella, cheddar, and Parmesan

Salt and pepper