When the Moon Hits Your Eye ...

Or Pizzas of the Past in New Orleans

“When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s amoré!” That’s love! So sang Dino in 1953. And when it comes to love, pizza has often played a part. In my teens, when on a date (after a dance or movie), the evening was often concluded with a trip to the pizza parlor. There weren’t any big chain pizza options back then, so one usually went to his or her favorite neighborhood place.

“Domino” has always been a “big name” in New Orleans music, but it is also reportedly the name of the city’s first pizzeria. Now, I am not referring to the national Domino’s Pizza chain that began in Michigan in 1960, when Tom Monaghan and his brother, James, took over the operation of DomiNick’s, an existing location of what was then a small pizza restaurant chain. No, New Orleans had its very own Domino’s quite a number of years before.

Domino’s Restaurant and Bar, today the Herbsaint Restaurant
The New Orleans Domino’s was located at 701 St. Charles, corner Girod Street, where Herbsaint Restaurant is today. An ad in the *Times-Picayune*, dated September 21, 1958, proclaimed the establishment owned by “Mr and Mrs. Sam Domino” to be the “Oldest Pizza house in New Orleans,” having “started at Decatur and St. Louis” in the French Quarter “12 years” previously. In addition to “Over 25 different pizza varieties,” one could enjoy other “Italian specialties at Domino’s: Stuffed Lasagna, Ricotta, Veal Cutlet Mozzarella Parmigiana, Veal Scaloppine,” as well as “steaks, Seafood, Chicken”.

Now that would have placed Domino’s founding circa 1945-46, right after the war. Pizza consumption exploded in the U.S. after World War II with vets returning from the Italian Campaign having been introduced to Naples’ delicious yeasted flatbread topped with tomato sauce and melted cheese.

Another contender for the “oldest pizzeria in New Orleans” was “Segreto’s Restaurant and Bar,” also on St. Louis in the Quarter. Joe Segreto’s *Picayune* ad, dated August 9, 1945, proclaimed “HERE AT LAST --- THE DISH YOU HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR” and by “YOU” he meant “Servicemen from all parts of the country” who developed a fondness for the Neapolitan dish while serving in Italy during the war. Segreto was also Leon Prima’s partner in the “500 Club” on Bourbon during the 1940s. Leon was a jazz trumpeter like his younger brother, the great Louis Prima. Later on, Segreto was a bartender and employee of the Fair Grounds for many years. He died in 1983.

Gene Bourg, writing in *The Times Picayune/The States-Item* in 1986, lauded Sam Domino’s “pizza pie” as “indisputably the best” with “imported ingredients”. He also wrote, “During the opera season,
Italian singers sometimes wandered in after midnight for a taste of home.” “Domino’s,” according to Tom Fitzmorris, “set an atmospheric standard: a dark space only lightly renovated from some past use, with a juke box with a mix of hits from two highly disparate eras of popular music. (Elvis and Frankie Laine.)” He also loved the Domino pie, “clearly based on the New York model, and ... well executed. Its thin crust held a restrained layer of sauce and cheese, plus everything else that you ordered on it. Perhaps their most distinctive pie was a garlic pizza: a cheese job sprinkled with a great deal of garlic. It was delicious, and as long as your date also ate it you wouldn’t regret ordering it.”

In a 1972 *Times-Picayune* ad, one learned that the “Original Domino’s Pizza” had moved to 3901 Airline Highway.

By 1950, one could visit “THE KING OF PIZZA,” aka “Bill Rizzo,” who made a special announcement in the “Want-Ad Reporter” column in the *Picayune* on August 8, 1950, that “he is not connected with any other pizza establishment, and has never been involved with narcotics traffic.” What a glowing endorsement!

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THE KING OF PIZZA

Bill Rizzo, “the king of pizza,” announces in the Special Notices that he is not connected with any other pizza establishment, and has never been involved with narcotics traffic.
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“THE KING,” who had spent many weeks in Naples during World War II “befriending the guardians of pizza pie recipes,” as Naples had been the home of pizza pies for centuries and all different variations were “jealously cherished secrets”.

Located at 511 Bourbon Street, “THE KING OF PIZZA” served a complete variety of pies “from a sizzling plate” and “cut with scissors”. They were advertised as an “after-theater, after-dance favorite snack” and came with anchovies, chicken, cheese, sardines and other toppings. What’s more the “lads and lassies” were reminded: “Pizza is pronounced “peet-zah.” The *Advocate*, on January 10, 1946, had a similar instruction: “Pizza (pronounced peet-za) is ... the after-the-movie-snack favorite of teenagers.”

By 1970, Rizzo’s moved to 440 Bourbon Street.
For narcotic-free pizza, Rizzo “THE PIZZA KING” was your man

Just how important was Naples in the origin of this American food favorite? Quite a lot, actually. A 1935 headline in the *Times-Picayune* announced “PIZZA NEAPOLITAN RECIPE DETAILED” and its accompanying article provided a Manhattan chef’s take on the “succulent” Italian dish.

But a much earlier article in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, dated January 21, 1861, described “THE NEAPOLITAN PIZZA” as a “favorite Neapolitan delicacy,” which “baked in five minutes in the oven” is “served up piping hot” and involves the baker spreading out the dough “with the palm of his hand” and “pours over it mozzarella” and “adds grated cheese, herbs and tomato”. Sounds pretty close to our modern-day pizza.

Not only that, the article explained that, once the baker inserted the pizza into the oven, the “outside crust must in the case of a perfect pizza, possess a certain orthodox crispness.” The delicacy was also observed to be a great “social leveller” where “rich and poor harmoniously congregate” in the pizza shops to enjoy this popular culinary creation. In those days, however, it was “only made and eaten between sunset and two and three in the morning.”

Only five days after the above article appeared, the delegates to Louisiana’s secession convention meeting in Baton Rouge voted 113 to 17 to secede from the Union.

An immigrant *pizzaiolo* (pizza maker) from Naples named Gennaro Lombardi opened the first pizzeria in the United States in 1905. It was in New York. Coal brick ovens were used in the original New York pizzerias, and the pizzas were first baked with the cheese on the bottom and the sauce on top.
The word pizza first appeared in the 10th century, in a Latin manuscript from the central Italian town of Gaeta, then still part of the Byzantine Empire. Pizza and pita bread share a common etymology. The delicious outer edge of the pizza is sometimes referred to as the *cornicione*. Today, pizza is a $45.1 billion industry in the United States. The top two chains (neck-and-neck), Pizza Hut (No. 1) and Domino’s (No. 2) represent over $11 billion of that number.

In 1975, Domino’s Pizza (the national chain) won a lawsuit filed against it by Amstar Corporation, the maker of Domino Sugar, which alleged trademark infringement and unfair competition. On May 2, 1980, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Domino’s Pizza. Also in 1975, a robber wearing a gorilla mask “jumped out of a banana plant” to rob the Pizza Hut on Kabel Drive in Algiers, Louisiana. Grunting orders to a waitress, he made off with over $1,000.

**Monkey Business Earns $1,248 for Grunting Pizza Hut Robber**

Pizza chains such as Domino’s, Pizza Hut, and Papa John’s are so ubiquitous, thirteen percent of the U.S. population consumes pizza on any given day. Shakey’s Pizza, founded in 1954, was actually the first franchise pizza chain based in the United States. The Greater New Orleans area got two “Shakey’s Pizza Parlor & Ye Public House” locations in 1966, one at 2325 Veterans Highway (home of Shogun today) and the other in the Woolco Shopping Center, Westside Expressway, Gretna, Louisiana. According to a *Times-Picayune* article, dated August 18, 1974, the chain, founded in Sacramento, California, by Sherwood “Shakey” Johnson, a Swede who grew up in “an all-Italian neighborhood”, also offered “old-time piano and banjo” for musical entertainment. “Shakey,” a jovial, mutton-chopped entrepreneur, while in the Navy, was one of eight Johnsons on his ship. He got the nickname “Shakey” to differentiate from the others because “he suffered malnutrition which induced tremors.” He was fine with this. “They gave me the name with love and I have always held onto it.”
I was an aficionado of Shakey’s pizza buffet. Those were the days.

Other big national chains that came to New Orleans and its environs (other than Shakey’s, Pizza Hut and Domino’s) were Godfather’s, Papa John’s, Cicis (formerly CiCi’s), Little Caesar’s and Mellow Mushroom. As these national chains made their way into the Crescent City and the Greater New Orleans area, locals still had their neighborhood favorites.

If one was in the Tulane/Loyola University area, Maple Street was the place to go. While “Shakey” was a Swede, Phillips Restaurant and Bar at 733 Cherokee Street, corner Maple Street, was in Yugoslavian hands. According to an article in The Times-Picayune/The States-Item, dated March 13, 1982, Rose Stipelcovich Phillips “went into business on her own 45 years” before. That would have been in the late 1930s. Just when she started serving pizza was not revealed, but the Phillips “15-inch pizzas” were “famous” in 1982, starting at just $5.25 for a cheese pizza.

Another great choice on Maple Street, corner Hillary, was “The Raven,” where Percy the bartender held sway. Advertised as “The Crepe Suzette of Pizza” since the crust was so thin, “The Raven” offered its
“Special Pizza,” a “blend of sausage, mushrooms, anchovies, salami, pepperoni, onions and bell pepper in 1968 for only $3.35 for a Large.

Phillips, long time favorite on Cherokee and Maple

“Once upon a midnite dreary
As I studied weak and weary
I drove by the Pizza Haven
An old English tavern
They call the Raven.”

The Raven
Corner of MAPLE & HILLARY

The Raven, corner of Maple and Hillary streets
. . . with something new in old New Orleans,
freshly baked Pizza Pies from an open hearth
oven . . . Crepe Suzette Pizza, with a crust
as thin as a crepe Suzette.

Also on Maple, The Raven, from a 1965 ad in the Times-Picayune

One of my favorites in the 60s was “Victor’s” at 601 Chartres, corner Toulouse, in the Quarter, once the haunt of Tennessee Williams. Victor’s is today the “Chartres House”. Then there was” Ruffino’s” at 625 St. Philip, which had a grand opening in June 1961. Open from 5 P.M. to 2 A.M. daily, “Pizza Pies and Spaghetti and Meatballs” were featured. Before moving to North Broad in 1966, “Angelo’s Pizza House” (opened 24 hours a day) was located at 1201 Decatur. It was decisely a family affair run by Angelo, his son, brother and nephews.
For many of us, “Venezia,” on North Carrollton right off Canal Street, provided a memorable after-date pizza experience. And it’s still going strong today. An ad from the *Times-Picayune*, dated April 11, 1976, stated that it had been “A New Orleans Favorite for 19 Years,” placing its founding in the late 1950s. “Come in and experience fine Italian salads and pizza pies,” the ad offered.
“Toney’s Spaghetti House,” at 212 Bourbon Street, no longer in operation, was once a great late-night place to stop for pizza. “The Artista Pizza Kitchen” was also a fabulous pizza place, located in a storefront to the left of the Tiger Theatre entrance, on Franklin Avenue. Walter Forschler, Sr. founded Artista Pizza in 1958. In 1965, he opened Tower of Pizza on Downman Road, where it remained until Hurricane Katrina. Sal LoGiudice took over as proprietor of Artista Pizza on Franklin until it closed in 1986.

Forschler and his family opened other pizza establishments in Jefferson Parish until a cousin suggested they all have the same names, “Tower of Pizza”. The “Tower of Pizza” at 2104 Veterans, now the only one, is run by Walter Forschler, Jr., and has been in operation since the 1970s. And the pizza is consistently the same, from a recipe dating back sixty years.

After so much great pizza, there had to be some not-so-good pizza. In fact, it wasn’t long before a local chain called “Mr. Pizza” suddenly appeared in almost every neighborhood advertising the “World’s Worst Pizza.” It wasn’t that bad, but the ads caught one’s attention. And, as Tom Fitzmorris opined, “it wasn’t the best, either.” The chain mostly came apart in the 1970s.

In Bucktown, Roland F. Mollere and his wife Ora opened “R & O’s Pizza Place” in 1980. Its beginnings were quite small, but its success brought about a much larger restaurant on Old Hammond Highway. The Times-Picayune noted after Roland’s death in 2016, “R & O’s menu’s blend of Creole-Italian, Cajun and south Louisiana seafood cookery is unique to New Orleans generally and Bucktown in particular.” The pizza, along with the other great selections, “satisfies tastes across generations.” Ora died in 2014. The four children carry on their parents’ legacy in the restaurant today.
For UNO students, "Luigi’s Pizza Warehouse" at 6235 Elysian Fields was the pizza place of choice. It didn’t hurt that Luigi’s was in walking distance from the university and offered 35-cents draft beers. Pinball machines, Aretha on the jukebox and a pool table – what didn’t they have to further one’s college education? Oh, the Radiators played there on Wednesday nights from 10 P.M. until.

“Off the beaten path of the more crowded and raucous Upper French Quarter, and only a block from historic Bourbon Street,” Mona Lisa at 1212 Royal Street has served as a neighborhood staple for more than thirty years. In addition to great pizzas and other Italian dishes, the atmosphere is markedly romantic, and the walls are adorned with Mona Lisa’s of every possible type. Visitors are encouraged to color their own masterpiece. My “Mona Pizza”, I’m happy to say, graces the walls. Happily, a second location is coming on Magazine Street.

A few words must be said about New York-style pizza, which is pizza executed with a characteristically large hand-tossed thin crust, often sold in wide slices to go. “New York Pizza” at 4418 Magazine is not quite the quintessential pizza from the Big Apple, but Wayne Del Corral had that in mind when he opened his pizzeria in 1980 on a Magazine Street corner. Perhaps it would serve as a memory of home for Tulane students from the Northeast. A second location opened on Carrollton in the same block as Brocato’s in 1992, but has been closed for over a decade.

Chicago-style pizza, which can refer to a number of different styles of pizza created in Chicago, today usually refers to what we call deep-dish pizza. “That’s Amoré” on St. Charles and in Metairie specialize in this variety of pizza.

Another popular choice is the pizza Margherita, which has nothing to do with the tequila cocktail. Legend tells us it was invented in 1889, when the Royal Palace of Capodimonte commissioned the Neapolitan
Pizza was invented by Raffaele Esposito to create a pizza in honor of the visiting Queen Margherita, one topped in the colors of the Italian flag: red (tomato), green (basil) and white (mozzarella). Recent research, however, casts doubt on this colorful myth.

When did most New Orleanians first taste a spinach pizza? It was very likely at "Louisiana Pizza Kitchen," which had its start on Esplanade, with later locations in the French Quarter and on Carrollton. For nearly two and a half decades, it has been serving up different takes on classic favorites. Pizza restaurants like "Domenica," which translates as "Sunday" in Italian, offers Napolitano style pizzas, all prepared in the restaurant’s iconic wood oven. Adolfo Garcia’s “Ancora” on Freret Street serves authentic Neapolitan pizzas in its “hand-crafted in Naples” oven, called “Mt. Vesuvius.” Susan Spicer’s Mondo in Lakeview also serves great pizzas baked in its wood-fired oven.

There are quite a number of other pizza parlors that have been around for a while, like “Mark Twain Pizza” on Metairie Road, “Reginelli’s” in numerous locations around town, and others, such as “Café Roma”, “Katie’s” and “The Original Italian Pie”.

There are so many newer pizza establishments in New Orleans, it is difficult to keep track. “Pizza Delicious” has become quite popular, located in the Marigny between Piety and Desire. “Theo’s” has been successful and has locations uptown on Magazine, in Mid City on Canal and on Veterans in Metairie. “Slice Pizzeria” opened in the Lower Garden District on St. Charles Avenue in 2004 and later Uptown on Magazine Street five years later. “Mid City Pizza” on Banks Street is a local pizzeria proud of its “big thin-crust pies loaded with toppings”. “Sugar Park” on St. Claude serves up thin-crust New York-style pies,
and the “Oak Oven” in Harahan serves authentic Neapolitan pizza. “Midway Pizza” on Freret has a $9.95 all-you-can-eat lunch special.

“Blaze” has locations on O’Keefe and Freret that tout their “blazing hot ovens”, plus “exceptional quality at lightning fast speed”. “Fast-fire’d custom-built artisanal pizzas” are just the thing for Millennials who prefer not to wait. Founded in 2011, it is one of the fastest growing pizza chains in the country.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to name all the many pizza possibilities in the Greater New Orleans area. I have tried to cover in depth those pizzerias that operated in the early days of pizza in the city. If I have failed to mention any of your favorite pizza haunts ... per favore scusami.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“Pizzas of the Past in New Orleans”
Ned Hémard
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