



Casa Nonna: Is Good Pizza Good Enough?

Posted by [J. Kenji Lopez-Alt](#) on July 27, 2011



Casa Nonna

310 West 38th Street, New York, NY 10018 (between 8th & 9th Avenue [map](#)); 212-736-3000; e2hospitality.com/casa-nonna-new-york

Pizza style: Neapolitan-style pizza

Oven type: Gas-fired

The skinny: Decent pizzas with high quality toppings, but a little tough.

Price: Pizzas: \$13 to \$16

We all know that the best pizzerias in the world are owner-occupied, right? Almost all foods benefit from a good dose of passion behind the stove, but [Neapolitan](#) pizza, like other breads, takes it to the extreme. It attracts the loonies. The obsessives. The guys who build ovens in their backyards, who make their own mozzarella, who talk to their dough with their hands. Great Neapolitan pizza is not a casual affair; I can't think of a single pie that I would qualify as "great" that doesn't have an obsessive manning, or at least keeping an eye over the peel and the oven: [Pizzeria Bianco](#), [Una Pizza Napoletana](#), [Motorino](#), [Paulie Gee](#)—the list goes on.

For some reason, it just seems like a skill that can't be taught, at least not to someone who doesn't share the same passion. [New York pizzas](#), [bar pies](#), [New Haven pies](#), [Greek pizza](#), these are styles that can be made by anyone with the right training and the right oven. Not so with Neapolitan pies.

It's for this reason that whenever I step into a pizzeria that looks like it was designed by a committee—a pizza concept more than a pizzeria—I immediately have my guard up. [Casa Nonna](#), a new Neapolitan pizzeria on west 38th set off my internal alarm bells.

To be fair, it's more than a pizzeria. They offer a full menu of Roman and Tuscan food, with a dozen pastas and antipasti, grilled fish and meat, and a few other braised or fried dishes. With a name like Casa Nonna (Grandma's house), you'd expect some warmth and comfort. On the contrary, the space is upscale, cold, and over-trendy, like a fancy version of the Cheesecake Factory. **I'd like to know whose grandmother has a house like this.**



Meals begin with freshly baked bread. It's light and crisp, with a cheesy center and a heavy hand with the salt. Tasty, and excellent for building up a thirst. They have a number of house cocktails in the \$12 to \$15 range, though I have trouble paying that much for drinks in a space with so little personality.

Antipasti are also quite nice. **Roasted Mortadella** (\$10) tastes like really great fried bologna and comes with sweet oven-dried cherry tomatoes and a drizzle of *vin cotto*, a sweet and syrupy cooked wine.



Polpettine (\$11) are good, but not great. The small braised meatballs come in a fragrant tomato sauce with plenty of olive oil and good cheese, and the balls are moist and tender, but we found more than a few gristly bits in them—the meat needed to be ground finer.



But it's the pizza you care about, right? And that's where things got interesting. They're baked in a gas fired oven (it looks very much like a [WoodStone](#), but it was obscured behind a layer of bricks so I couldn't tell for sure), so they don't get any of the smokiness of a real Neapolitan pizza, but they arrived looking pretty decent—a few nicely charred bubbles, fresh looking tomatoes, and well melted cheese.

And indeed, with the first bite they *were* quite good: well seasoned, flavorful dough stretched out ultra thin, high quality milky, creamy mozzarella, and interesting topping combinations. The **Nonna** (\$16) comes with a couple of quail eggs and zucchini flowers stuffed with ricotta. I know some of you Slice'rs aren't into [eggs on your pizza](#), but I am, and quail eggs are a great way to do it. Rather than one large egg in the middle that needs to be squished around, each slice gets its own little burst of yolk. At least, that's how it should be. Here, however, they give you two slices with zucchini flower and two with egg, which doesn't make much sense.



The undercarriage reveals some **decent spotting** as well, but here's the problem: **they kind of cheat to get it**. Rather than having a super hot oven, they just cook their pizzas longer than they should. The result is a charred flavor that borders closer to acrid than to properly smoky. The dough also gets cooked too slowly, making it tough. You don't notice at first, but by the end of my second slice, my jaw had started to ache from the excessive chewing. Still, I wouldn't turn down the **Emila** (\$15), with broccoli rabe and homemade sausage, covered with a blanket of sharp, nutty grated Parmigiano-Reggiano. With its fresh tomato sauce and two types of cheese, it actually reminded me a lot of the flavor of a Di Fara pie, though I'm not sure I should be comparing the two.



I'm not really sure what to make of a place like this. I mean, it's good pizza, and in many towns it might be considered even great pizza. But in the middle of a city like New York? **Serving really good pizza simply isn't good enough**, not when there are places serving *great* pizza in spaces that have personality and history. Ultimately, what really kills it for me is the total lack of soul. It's an artificial feeling space designed to be easily replicated—they've got a location in D.C. as well.

Their business strategy is a bit baffling. It's an out of the way location with practically zero foot traffic, the prices are relatively high, and as far as I've seen they haven't done any sort of advertising. Where do they expect customers to come from? The best I can do is to recommend it to folks in the Times Square area as a decent option for Neapolitan pies without having to travel too far.

Oh, if you do go, order the **Bombolini** (\$10) for dessert. Those *were* pretty great.

