



Eat, pray, pizza: London's slice of the Neapolitan revolution

L'Antica Pizzeria da Michele has been an Italian institution for more than a century, but a Hollywood blockbuster turned it into a worldwide phenomenon. Now, its handcrafted pizza has made its way to the UK. Plus: the 10 best UK pizzerias outside London and the 10 best worldwide

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Is L'Antica Pizzeria da Michele the best pizzeria in the world? No - it is far bigger than that. Which explains the hysteria surrounding the opening of this Italian institution's third branch outside Naples, after Tokyo and Rome. It opens on Friday in Stoke Newington, London. Expect the queues to be long.

There is a reason: da Michele is the restaurant where Julia Roberts's character in *Eat Pray Love* enters into a relationship with a margherita pizza. While there are dozens of old-school pizzerias in the historic centre of Naples with hardcore followings for soft-cored Neapolitan pizza, da Michele has asserted itself, generation after generation, as a paragon of purism. "L'Antica Pizzeria da Michele perfectly represents the Neapolitan tradition," says Antonio Mattozzi, author of *Inventing the Pizzeria: A History of Pizza Making in Naples*.

It all started in 1870 when Salvatore Condurro received his licence to make pizza. He prepared and sold *pizza fritta* (deep-fried pizza) on the street outside his home in Naples. His son, Michele, opened the family's first pizzeria in 1906. With the words "*Il tempio della pizza*" (the

temple of pizza) etched on the backs of their white polos, today, the da Michele bakers uphold not so much an ideal pizza as a pizza ideal: Neapolitan-style pizza as it was in the heart of its ancestral homeland - unplugged, unembellished and uncorrupted.

Their handcrafted pizzas are more biomorphic than circular, with a distorted shape and uneven distribution of toppings. The defining constant is a diameter larger than that of the plate beneath it, otherwise known as *pizza a ruota di carro* ("cartwheel pizza"). The pizzaioli are capable of making perfectly round pizzas, and sometimes they do. Accidents like that happen. But mostly they just don't get bogged down with superficial details or showmanship.

When it comes to the perfect Neapolitan pizza, it's all about the base. Subjected to one minute of 500C heat in a wood-fired oven, the pizza at da Michele acquires more black spots than a leopard. The dark clusters (crucially, without a crunchy texture or burnt taste) around the *cornicione*, a pizza's puffed rim, are the markings of rustic, low-tech baking. While charring typically turns bread crisp and dry, the interior of this crust is soft and steamy. To prevent sagging and even collapse, the pizza must be handled with knowing, loving hands - the baker's as well as the eater's.

The Neapolitan-style has caught fire in the UK already, with Italian and British-born traders alike embracing its aura of authenticity. This pizza renaissance traces back to 2008, when Giuseppe Mascoli founded Franco Manca, in London's Brixton Market. Now there are 29 Franco Mancas nationwide serving soft-crust, wood-fired pizza, including a branch in Stoke Newington - 0.3 miles from da Michele. Britain's embrace of the Naples pizza school - as opposed to the regional styles of Rome, Verona, Sicily or such capitals of the pizza diaspora as New York, Detroit or Buenos Aires - poses risks and rewards for da Michele.



Franco Manca was founded by Giuseppe Mascoli in 2008.

Photograph: Michelle Grant/Rex/Shutterstock

The Condurro family may be heartened to discover that Londoners already know and appreciate this kind of pizza. Their customers won't need to be initiated into the pleasures of a bendy crust, rather than a rigid one better equipped to support layer upon layer of unctuous toppings. But with this familiarity comes pressure to hold London's interest.

As a latecomer to London's pizza roots movement, da Michele will not be crowned Neapolitan pizza king by acclamation, nor by virtue of doing something terribly new or unusual. Its claim to fame here, as in Naples, will be same old, same old. As such, the menu in London, as at home, will be limited to two classic pizzas: the margherita, with tomato, *fior di latte* (cow's milk mozzarella) and basil; and the marinara, with tomato, oregano and garlic. The Condurros were pondering the unthinkable: adding a third pizza, possibly a rotated special. In the end, they decided to stick with the limited menu that got them where they are.

Beyond the initial period of curiosity, success at da Michele's London branch may ultimately depend on a single factor: whether its Neapolitan pizza is truly distinct from the versions at top-notch London joints such as Santa Maria in Ealing and Fulham, Addommè in Streatham Hill or Sud Italia at Spitalfields.

Time will tell if the Condurros will stick stubbornly and, many would add, admirably to their two-pizza dictum or perhaps start to incorporate local, British-made ingredients, as the likes of Franco Manca have. The question is: would adding new options to the menu merely betray a lack of faith in Londoners to appreciate proper pizza without embellishment?

. Daniel Young of youngandfoodish.com is author of *Where to Eat Pizza: The Experts' Guide to the Best Pizza Places in the World*.

The 10 best UK pizzerias outside London



Neapolitan-style pizza is taking root all over the UK. Photograph: Michelle Grant/Rex/Shutterstock

Outside London, the competition is as stiff as the dough is soft, with indie pizzerias setting high standards across Britain.

Fatto a Mano, Brighton

77 London Rd, BN1 4JF

65-67 Church Rd, Hove, BN3 2BD

Fatto a Mano may mean “made by hand” but the ethos here is Fatto a Napoli.

Dusty Knuckle, Cardiff

The Printheus, 70a Llandaff Rd, CF11 9NL

A proponent of slow food and fast pizza, this mobile pizzeria sets up at the Printheus from Thursday to Sunday.

Civerinos, Edinburgh

5 Hunter Square, EH1 1QW

With Scottish-Italian street food in its blood, Civerinos is probably the first pizza joint to combine Scottish flank steak with buffalo mozzarella on a sourdough pizza.

Dough Boys, Leeds

Belgrave Music Hall & Canteen, 1a Cross Belgrave St, LS2 8JP

A great slice joint, Dough Boys lets you mix it up with a wide assortment of traditional and exotic toppings.

Cal's Own, Newcastle upon Tyne

1-2 Holly Ave, NE2 2AR

With its move from Heaton to Jesmond, Cal's Own traded in its electric oven for a woodfired beauty from Campania, the same region from where it gets its tomatoes and mozzarella.

The Hearth Pizzeria, Lewes

Eastgate, BN7 2LP

Bread master-turned-pizzaiolo Michael Hanson uses local blue cheese, lamp and heirloom wheat in his signature pizzas.

Honest Crust, Altrincham

Altrincham Market House, 26 Market St, WA14 1PF

Pizza hippie Richard Carver, master of seasonal toppings, fell in love with craft-pizza baking on a trip not to Italy but northern California.

Rudy's, Manchester

9 Cotton Street, Ancoats, M4 5BF

In Manchester's Little Italy, co-owner/chef Jim Morgan strives to make his pizza more and more Neapolitan.

Bertha's Sourdough Pizza, Bristol

The Old Gaol Stables, Cumberland Rd, BS1 6WW

Graham and Kate Farragher do lots of cheffy things with their pizzas, but even the basic margherita, with homemade mozzarella, is exceptional.

A Casa Mia, Herne Bay

160 High Street, Kent, CT6 5AJ

The only pizza restaurant in the UK to meet the strict guidelines of the Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana - the Neapolitan pizza police.



The 10 best pizzerias worldwide

1 Pepe in Grani, Italy

San Giovanni Battista, Campania 81013

Occupying a restored palazzo 30 miles north of Naples, Franco Pepe is an innovator consumed by tradition, the land and memory. As a result, signature creations such as his margherita sbagliata ("mistaken margherita") or sensazioni di costiera ("sensations of the coast") are master-pizzas of destiny.

2 Pizzarium, Italy

Via della Meloria, 43 Cipro-Ottaviano, Rome, Lazio 00136

Gabriele Bonci is the Michelangelo of *pizza al taglio* - the rectangular, "by the cut", ready-to-go pizza displayed in bakery-like window cases throughout Rome. At Pizzarium, the pizza

selection is so vast and impressive there is almost a risk of it distracting from the singular experience of Bonci's divinely airy crust and its compression to the chew.

3 50 Kalò di Ciro Salvo, Italy

Piazza Sannazaro 201B, Mergellina, Naples, Campania 80122

The glamour permeating 50 Kalò reflects the freshly elevated status of pizza in Naples. Its dough yields an incomparably light, supple crust - a flawless platform for the very best pizza sourcing and baking technique.

4 I Tigli, Italy

Via Camporosolo 11, San Bonifacio, Veneto 37047

Before I Tigli only Michelin chefs and sushi masters worked with tweezers; not pizzaioli. Applying impeccable raw materials with meticulous craftsmanship, Simone Padoan has transformed pizza into a refined finger food. The Italian press call it *pizza gourmet*. Padoan introduced sashimi to pizza and created a brioche pizza dough to replace the toast for foie gras.

5 Pizzeria Bianco, USA

623 E Adams St, Phoenix, Arizona 85004

When, in 1988, Chris Bianco began making pizzas in a grocery store, Phoenix, Arizona was not yet Margheritaville USA. With know-how developed in New York and Italy, supplies from local producers and homemade mozzarella, Bianco crafted the touchstone for artisanal pizza. He is a hero to DIY pizza geeks with woodfired ovens everywhere.

6 Pizzeria la Notizia, Italy

Via Michelangelo da Caravaggio, 53 Mergellina, Naples, Campania 80126

Enzo Coccia can lecture on dough hydration, or rhapsodise over the stretchy mozzarella clinging to a pizza as a slice of it is pulled away. It is this delicious paradox that makes La Notizia so remarkable: you can order an inventive pizza with stunning ingredients and appreciate it was conceived by a master, or choose a classic, cheesy margherita and know it was prepared by a scholar who is a kid at heart.

7 L'Antica Pizzeria da Michele, Italy

Via Cesare Sersale 1-3 Forcella, Naples, Campania 80139

Da Michele is part pizza temple and part pizza time machine. Its mystique rests on the resolve of Michele Condurro, the legendary stickler who opened the pizzeria in 1906, and his heirs to limit the selection to two classic pizzas, the margherita and the marinara. Free-form pizzas too big for their plates, or boxes, are perfect in their rustic imperfection.

8 Bæst, Denmark

Guldbergsgade 29, Copenhagen, Hovedstaden 2200

The charred pizza crust at the stylish Italian restaurant opened by Michelin-starred chef Christian Puglisi is delicately crunchy outside and divinely soft inside - a perfect base for house-made organic charcuterie and cheeses, including hand-stretched mozzarella.

9 Roberta's, USA

261 Moore Street, Brooklyn, New York

The utter excitement of finding something new and edgy in the grimmest reaches of the city is part of every bohemian counterculture. What's unique about Roberta's rise from the cinderblocks of Bushwick, Brooklyn is that its fame came not from painting, poetry or punk rock, but from pizza. Fittingly, the spicy pizzas wear lots of black, acquired in the wood-fired blaze.

10 Bráz, Brazil

Rue Graúna 125, Moema, São Paulo

Bráz upholds the immigrant traditions of São Paulo, one of the world's great pizza capitals. The toppings, both imported and Brazilian, are higher in quality and more abundant than ever. And the bakers in white hats and waiters in black ties make a great show of it.

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