

Pizza Passion

I'm not a stalker, honest to goodness, but I do keep track of certain men in my life, especially men who make amazing pizza.

When I was researching my *Pizza* cookbook in 2004, I read about Roberto Caporuscio, a Neapolitan career-changer who wanted to become a world-class pizzaiolo. He graduated from the prestigious Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletano in Naples. He moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, of all places, to open a pizzeria. I say "of all places," because that's where I grew up and to me, at least, it wasn't an obvious locale to bring one's unswerving passion for true Neapolitan pizza (though I can report that the food scene is getting progressively better).

Roberto's pizzas are simple and light, with uncomplicated flavors. The crust is perfection: slightly charred, with a thick rounded edge, yet with a soft, unique finish, a pleasant chew, and a slight smoky taste. The slightly thicker edge of the pizza crust, called a *cornicione*, is a distinct characteristic of Neapolitan pizzas, and his are a masterpiece.

While Roberto's two pizzerias in Pittsburgh had a dedicated following, he realized it wasn't the right place to execute his craft. With frequent trips to visit my family (and his pizzeria as an essential eating stop), I kept track of him and learned he was heading to New Jersey, resurfacing at a pizzeria called Mano. As in Pittsburgh, he had a 4,000 pound, wood-fired pizza oven shipped from Italy, which he helped assemble and personally finish with mosaic tiles. Then, after a year or so, due to a falling out with his partners, he left. I didn't know where he had gone and, more importantly, I didn't know when I would ever taste his amazing pizza again.

Then, about a month ago, I was reading the New York Times Dining section and saw mention of a pizzeria in the West Village called Kesté Pizza and Vino, with Roberto named as co-owner. I went to the website and there he was, pictured in front of his wood-fired pizza oven in a new spot on Bleecker Street. I was traveling to New York anyway to visit my children, and I headed right there.

This past Friday afternoon, my son, daughter, and my son's girlfriend ate lunch at Kesté. I came unannounced, hoping he would be there. The restaurant is long and very narrow with dark wood tables, sepia-toned photographs of Naples, and caramel-colored walls. We were seated up front at the table by the window. I squinted to see the silver-tile-domed pizza oven at the back, and Roberto was there, in his classic white t-shirt, white pants, and white waist apron. We hugged, we kissed three times on the cheek, we caught up, and then he fed us.

My children understand my love of food, my passion for pizza, and my adoration of Roberto's craft. He said he was concerned about the heat and humidity in New York City and was still perfecting his dough in the basement kitchen. He said he needs to tinker with his formula and proofing times to make it work—clearly, his level of fanaticism hasn't changed. His pizzas were as spectacular as I remembered them in Pittsburgh.

He's found, I'm thrilled, and I will now find any little excuse I can to head to New York, with the first stop being 271 Bleecker Street (at Morton).

-Diane