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Slices With Life

SEARCHING FOR THE BEST PIZZA IN JACKSONVILLE

BY JEFFREY SPEAR

Pizza is among America's favorite foods. Of course, no matter where you live, or who you ask, everyone has an opinion about where to find the best pie in town. While trying to agree on the most outstanding pizza in Jacksonville, at least among my circle of food savvy friends, it became apparent that we all had preferences and none of us shared the same opinion.

To settle our differences, I suggested a pizza crawl, sampling slices at each of the spots we believed were among the best in town. In addition, to ensure consistent experiences at every stop, we agreed to limit our selection to Margherita pizzas, made simply with tomatoes, mozzarella cheese, fresh basil and olive oil. In this regard, our evaluations would focus on a limited set of variables, allowing us to more accurately compare

and contrast flavor, texture, appearance and overall enjoyment.

After ten destinations, ten pies and plenty of beer on the side, we learned a lot about the elements that contribute to making a truly great pizza. Here's a glimpse into what we discovered.

Our adventure began at **Bones Pizza** on Mayport Road. Co-located with Reve Brewing, the one-two punch of wood-fired pizzas accompanied by an impressive selection of craft beers was an excellent way to kick-start our investigations. Their version of a margherita pizza—the Mayporita—was excellent, arriving perfectly baked with a nice touch of charring on a crispy yet somewhat chewy crust. Suitably impressed, had this been our only destination for the day, we would have been more

than happy to order more of everything and make ourselves at home.

The rest of this day's tastings took place within a stone's throw of the Atlantic Ocean, including visits to **Joseph's Pizza** in Atlantic Beach, **Mezza Luna Ristorante** and **Al's Pizza** in Neptune Beach, and **V-Pizza** in Jacksonville Beach. While each of us had expectations of how good these pizzas were going to be, we did not find a demonstrably better pie among them. Yes, the pizzas were enjoyable. Their crusts—sometimes thin and crispy, other times thicker and chewier—were the biggest differentiators. When it came to overall appeal, we all commented how nicely the Margherita at Al's was presented but this alone was not enough to win everyone over. Ultimately, we were hard-pressed to pick a pie that out-performed the rest.

Knowing that we had five more pizzerias to visit, we remained optimistic. We were beginning to suspect, however, that had we ordered pizzas with a larger number of toppings, we might have liked them even more. Of course, we held to the opinion that a stand-out Margherita was sure to be found.

Having recovered from our first day of gluttony, we were ready to set out once again in search of an undeniably impressive Margherita pie. Our destinations this time were **Rodrigo's Craft Pizza, Pie95** and **Carmine's Pie House** in Riverside; **Moon River** in Murray Hill; and **Bella Vista** in Fruit Cove; all well regarded with loyal followings. To our surprise, as with the previous day's findings, it was difficult to distinguish one pie as noticeably better than the others. While the wood-fired pizzas at Pie95 and Rodrigo's had crusts that made them individual favorites, and all the pies had merit, no one pizza outperformed the others.

After so many pies, it was clear that finding Jacksonville's best was not going to be easy. Plus, knowing there were lots of other pizzerias that came highly recommended, our idea of a comprehensive pizza crawl was looking like a never-ending endeavor. Having been unable to find a clear winner so far, we agreed that conducting additional tastings, while enjoyable, would most likely deliver similar outcomes.

Knowing how passionately people spoke about their favorite pizzeria and their favorite pie, we decided identifying Jacksonville's best would be better left to individual preferences. We're still big fans of all of these places and eager to visit them again. So many pizzas. So little time. *



ORDER UP!

These specialty pies and slices earn raves:

AL'S PIZZA • The Greek

BELLA VISTA • Burrata Pizza

BONES PIZZA • Friend of the Devil

CARMINE'S PIE HOUSE • Chicago Stuffed Pizza Pie

JOSEPH'S • Joseph's Special

MEZZA LUNA • Wild Mushroom

MOON RIVER • T-Rex

PIE95 • Fungi Pizza

RODRIGO'S CRAFT PIZZA • The Bella

V-PIZZA • The V Stromboli *



Islands Adventure

Pass the pancit, please. **A Taste of the Philippines**, the Museum of Science and History's longest-running special event, returns this fall, and with an expanded lineup of tasty eats and activities. This year's foodie fete, October 24, 6-10 PM, will feature eight local Filipino chefs representing each of the eight major regions of the Philippines with a signature dish. Guests will not only enjoy the delicious food, but also learn about the different regions and the cultural significance of the dishes presented. As an added bonus, guests can take home the recipes for the featured dishes and try them out in their own kitchens.

In addition, the night includes a presentation of the temporary exhibition *Filipino Threaded Traditions* by Ang Panama, which links Filipino Americans and modern cultural expressions to the historical textile traditions of the island nation. Works by First Coast Filipino artists will also be featured in a separate exhibition. And the first floor of MOSH will be transformed into an Asian marketplace. Tickets are \$35-\$50. Save some lumpia for us! *