

INVENTING THE PIZZERIA

*A History of Pizza Making
in Naples*

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

There is an unfortunate current of food writing—both popular and academic—that places undue attention on the food product or the oft-heroicized artisan producer, but relegates the actual workshop to the margins of the account, or even the footnotes. These accounts often center on the artisan, working alone, motivated by “passion” with nary a thought to filthy lucre. Fortunately recent books like Susan Terrio’s *Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate* have shown how easy it is to be seduced by this tale, so often told about food-producing artisans today.^a In this book, Antonio Mattozzi looks past the myths about pizza and its mythic makers to focus instead on the real people who made the delicious discs and the places where they worked.

Inventing The Pizzeria approaches a part of Italian food history that Anglophones may have little familiarity with. Many investigations of Italian food in English have explored the food ways of Italian immigrants in other countries, and whether these food ways were in fact transplanted (i.e. traditions brought from Italy) or hybridizations.^b Other contributions in English to the literature on Italian food uneasily juxtapose Italian peasant food with elite cuisine. Intended as a corrective to the apparently class-less “Mediterranean Diet” puffery, these authors underscore that far from being the hearty meal of hardy farmers, the “cucina povera” (cuisine of the poor) was boring, repetitive, with a startling absence of things we think of as integral to the so-called “Mediterranean diet.” Good bread, olive oil, and real wine (as opposed to the watered-down, often vinegary substitute called *vinaccio*, literally “bad wine”) were only very occasionally part of the diet of the Italian peasant until the post Second World War period.^c Pellagra and other diseases common to malnourished populations were as present as prosciutto, butter and cheese were absent. Parallel to this ran the cuisine of the peninsula’s elite: while the use of spices, for example, changes, the cookbooks from Mastro Martino in the sixteenth century all the way down to the famous cookbook by Pellegrino Artusi in the late nineteenth all share a rich set of dishes that those that honed their scythes or rowed out early to

^aSusan J. Terrio, *Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Research similar to Terrio’s, this time in the pizzerias of Naples, would make for a fascinating study.

^bSee especially Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Harvey Levenstein, “The American Response to Italian Food, 1880–1930,” in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 75–90.

^cFor a good discussion of the “cucina povera,” see Gillian Riley, *The Oxford Companion to Italian Food* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 150.

fish could only dream of. Historians, obviously uneasy with the unearned culinary privilege of the rich and powerful, focus their attention on the distance between the two cuisines, rather than their connections.^d

In this book, Antonio Mattozzi deftly reconstructs the history of a particularly creative type of baker that, responding to the realities of demographics and the topographical straitjacket that the city of Naples was in, created a new food that was one of the first to be eaten by both the poor and (ultimately) the rest of the population too, both in Naples and the world over. This is an important contribution to the literature of food history, but also the social history of Naples and nineteenth-century urban history—and to what has been written on pizza itself. Precious few of the books about pizza's early history can claim any level of seriousness. One of the exceptions is John Dickie, who went a long way towards putting pizza in its proper historical context in his chapter on Naples in his book *Delizia*. Dickie, writing against the current of decades of just-so stories, showed how pizza was the food of the poor, and often suspected of being the vector of contagious diseases like the cholera that killed thousands of Neapolitans in the nineteenth century.^e Carol Helstosky carried the story further in her global history of pizza, describing the first expansion of the post Second World War pizza into new provinces, creating a global Republic of Red-sauce Pizzas by the last quarter of the twentieth century.^f These two serious investigations, though, are afloat in a sea of mythmaking. Even Franco La Cecla's otherwise admirable volume falls back into the same unsubstantiated stories about royal take-out. In this volume, Antonio Mattozzi highlights the fact that much writing on pizza falls under a narrative approach that “looks for the anecdote rather than the document, wittiness and a clever quip rather than the pure and simple narration of the facts, an approach that contaminates the real events with elements that are often legendary and fantastic.”^g In endless blogs, magazine articles and guidebook sidebars about pizza, the protagonists are either monarchs (often historically fond of the plebs and their cooking) or far-sighted makers of pizza that make the global spread of dish all but certain, a kind of culinary manifest destiny that does not even stop at the Pacific. *Inventing The Pizzeria* shows that nothing could be further from the truth.

This book by Antonio Mattozzi combines both serious analysis and more light-hearted commentary to trace the evolution of the pizzeria from a shop that was initially hard to distinguish from a bakery, and to focus our attention not on the steaming disc that people the world over love, but rather on the person who ran the pizzeria, the *pizzaiolo*. Mattozzi's careful analysis of their mention in all kinds of archival documents makes it clear that far from being the up-and-coming caterer of regal picnics, the *pizzaiolo* was initially at the bottom of the hills surrounding Naples (in among the crowded tenements) and at the bottom of the ladder of

^dA recent work that seeks to bridge the gap is Fabio Parasecoli, *Al Dente: A History of Food in Italy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014); see also Massimo Montanari, *Cheese, Pears, and History in a Proverb*, trans. Beth Archer Brombert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

^eJohn Dickie, *Delizia!: The Epic History of the Italians and Their Food* (New York: Free Press, 2008).

^fCarol Helstosky, *Pizza: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

^gThis is from the Mattozzi's preface in this volume.

artisans who worked there in the nineteenth century. Instead of the heroic (and equally mythic) artisan who worked only for passion, the pizzaiolo that Mattozzi paints for us is driven by the need to pay the rent and pay the waiters. Though focus on objective standards is always a goal, Richard Sennett has suggested that “social and economic conditions, however, often stand in the way of the craftsman’s discipline and commitment.”^h As numerous disappearances from the archives testify, making pizzas in Naples was a risky, precarious business that few succeeded in. Though today’s global presence of Neapolitan pizza seems to suggest otherwise, this success was far from being preordained. To the contrary, Mattozzi shows that after a century of existence independent from bakeries, the number of pizzerias had only barely doubled and was still around one hundred. In 1900, all of Naples’ pizzerias were still inside the walls of the old city, and the only attempt at taking pizza “abroad” (to Rome, only 225 kilometers away) had failed miserably.

In addition to his dispassionate examination of the product and the producer, Mattozzi gives attention to *place*—a hot topic in food studies. His explanation of pizza’s emergence is grounded in the particular environmental and socio-economic conditions of the city: hemmed in by the sea on one side and hills on three others, Naples pressed its inhabitants into a painfully small space. Mattozzi carefully traces out how the particular politics of the Kingdom of Naples created a city that in the mid-eighteenth century was Europe’s third largest and also had Europe’s highest population density. The incredible premium on space and high rents meant that inexpensive street food for residents who lived in kitchen-less (and often, window-less) abodes was bound to be popular. The teleological drive that seems to make pizza “meant to be” was undone by the real estate market. The same economic pressure that drove the poor out into the streets to find cheap, pre-cooked food also made it exceedingly difficult for that food’s producers to have enough of a margin (or a high enough volume) to pay the rent at the end of the month. Mattozzi’s pizzeria owners were in a perennially precarious position between running their own businesses and having to work for others. As if the rent were not enough to worry about, pizzerias also often fell to the wrecking ball. As Mattozzi explains, the late-nineteenth century version of “urban renewal” had exactly the same effect on Naples as it did on cities all over the world: the destruction of neighborhoods, bankruptcy of the small businessperson, and displacement of the urban poor. The “Risanamento” (renovation) program that the elite saw as cauterizing a dangerously diseased part of the city becomes, through this book’s investigation of its effects on pizzeria location and ownership, a case study for nineteenth-century urban history.

While two of the most frequently-used words in this book need no translation at all (“pizza” and “pizzeria”), it is the third—*pizzaiolo*—that taxes the translator. Pizza maker? Pizzeria-keeper? Pizza vendor? Unlike the product and the place where it is made, the person making the pizza is a linguistic hole in the English vocabulary. I have ultimately left this word (and *pizzaiola*, as there were plenty of women who ran pizzerias) untranslated, and I think it is important to explain why. In addition to tracing taste back to the highly-specialized (and ever-“passionate”)

^hRichard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 9.

artisan, there is also a vogue for giving climate, soil, and the specific varieties of grapes (or tomatoes, or forage, etc.), a central role—in other words, anything but hard, everyday human labor by people who were struggling against structural realities of the market or society. Terroir, or “the taste of place” as one commentator has ably translated it, makes a futile attempt to square the culinary circle by putting a static, absolute boundary around food’s taste.ⁱ This book is an attempt to render the sights, sounds and tastes of the nineteenth-century pizzeria, and to describe its evolution, and Antonio Mattozzi is careful to avoid falling into the current rabbit hole of terroir. He dismisses any sort of terroirist, boosterish argument that pizza tastes a certain way in Naples (because of the water, because of the volcanic soil, because of age-old traditions that never change), preferring to examine the people who stoked the oven, kneaded the dough and garnished the loaves-squished-round before baking them.^j

Inventing The Pizzeria is therefore Italian history, food history, urban history, but it is also social history. It emerges from the musty piles of papers to be found in the various Neapolitan archives, read back against the grain to tell stories that the bureaucrats who wrote them never intended to be told. Mattozzi’s prose leavens the awkwardly old-fashioned legalese of these documents, drawing on a wide variety of them—police reports, complaints from neighbors, architects’ inspections, accounts of fires, official censuses, lawsuits, marriage records, death certificates—to breathe life back into the pizzaiolo, or a composite that resembles of him or her. The result is a social history of the workers (and their workplace, the pizzeria) that have been all but forgotten with the global ascendancy of their product. That said, this cannot be considered a classic social history, as Mattozzi is very careful to remind the reader that the categories that the bureaucrats put people in were the invention of those same bureaucrats. Mattozzi spends considerable time discussing what William Sewell Jr. has called the central problematic of cultural history, “the question of how supposedly natural or settled identities have in fact been discursively established, maintained, and transformed.”^k Indeed, Mattozzi foregrounds the arbitrariness of the categories and the uncomfortable fit of the pizzaiolo within them: pizzerias were somewhere in between bakeries (because they had ovens) and restaurants (because customers were allowed by law to sit and socialize even after they had eaten), and those who worked in them were constantly moving back and forth between these other trades. Mattozzi also discusses two other kinds of pizzaiolo (street hawkers and back-alley producers) who further complicate the documentary record. The pizzaiola, the woman in the pizzeria, is also part of the story, though Mattozzi

ⁱ Amy Trubek, *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

^j For two other attempts to put the social back into taste and question the role of terroir, see Kolleen Guy, *When Champagne Became French: Wine and the Making of a National Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); and Simone Cinotto, *Soft Soil, Black Grapes: The Birth of Italian Winemaking in California* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

^k William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 48.

explains how the documentary record (so focused on male owners) makes us underestimate their actual contribution.

This story is certainly about the pizza as well—but it is primarily about change over time in the places pizzas were made, and about the pragmatic people who worked so hard to make them. It is about high rent and overcrowding, not bucolic vineyards; it is about working-class men and women who labored at the bottom of the social ladder, not highly-respected artisans; it is about a delicious dish that had some good luck, not about success that was waiting to happen. To understand pizza, we have to look beyond the mythical heroes (be they Queen Margherita or “famous” pizzaioli); we have to understand the historically minor significance of ingredients with a special stamp or seal or logo that makes them expensive. We have to look into the nineteenth-century pizzeria, which would be dark but for the light of the oven stoked by the pizzaiolo. We have to see a category of worker that—at least for Anglophones—has been invisible heretofore: the pizzaiolo. I am pleased to have helped cook a delightful-yet-erudite book that adds much to the scholarship on one of the most popular dishes on the planet.

Zachary Nowak
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