

Red Rocks: A Rome-inspired pizza feast

By Elana Schor

Washington owes several great debts to ancient Rome: the Senate, the capital aqueduct and the wood-burning brick oven.

The latter invention, much improved from its pizza-making premiere in ancient times, now headlines the show at RedRocks, Columbia Heights's charming new neighborhood boîte.

The District already has a fair share of excellent pizza, for all the lamenting of New York transplants who miss the doughy crusts of their hometown. But like Goldilocks getting her porridge just right, RedRocks aims its ambiance and ingredients in the pleasing middle ground between the city's popular pizza joints.

Located steps from the hopping bar scene at Wonderland, RedRocks reminded me a bit of Pizzeria Paradiso, only with the mellower ambiance that dark-wood décor and patio seating brings. RedRocks also somewhat resembles Matchbox, only without the trendy and distracting American dishes. But its taste will remind you a lot of 2 Amys, the legendary uptown pizzeria.

RedRocks's link to 2 Amys, where the crusts have a similar sourdough snap, has a lot to do with the presence of Edan MacQuaid. Formerly the expert cheese-baker for the Amys, MacQuaid has found a new brick oven in Columbia Heights, joining forces with RedRocks owner James O'Brien.

"We thought it was a good match," said O'Brien, 39, previous owner of Staccato in Adams Morgan. "He'd take care of the pizza recipe and I'd take care of concepts, like the creation of the space."

Strangely, the star of the space remains hidden from most diners' views. Imported from Italy and made of refractory bricks that send cheese climbing past 800 degrees of heat, RedRocks's brick oven works its magic from the basement. Servers then tote the pies up one or two flights of stairs, but

even at the height of the dinner rush, pizza stays piping hot upon its arrival.

Nearly all of the ingredients on RedRocks's pizzas are handmade or imported, and the freshness is palpable even on pies that leave something to be desired in the flavor department. The sausage and pepper pizza plays its sweet red vegetable off admirably against the fennel-flecked sharpness of the sausage, and an infusion of parmesan adds character to the cheese.

The peppers make an equally stellar appearance on a veggie pie, alongside smoky eggplant and zucchini, while a rich emerald pesto pops up next to sweet cherry tomatoes on its own 12-inch stage.

The most tantalizing pizza of all is dubbed "Napoli," a salty duet of capers and anchovies cut by fragrant basil and tomato. I requested a few dollops of ricotta to round out the alluring clash of flavors, and the pie was so perfectly cooked that the ricotta held its milky thickness even as the other toppings nicely charred.

But the funghi pizza falls flat, thanks to a too-mild fontina cheese that smothers the delicate topping it carries. A sharper cheese base, perhaps Romano or the Spanish Mahon cheese, would better complement the arrangement. In fact, dialing down the amount of cheese on most pies would eliminate the need to eat with a knife and fork to prevent larger slices from sagging under their own weight.

To focus only on RedRocks's pizza, however, would overlook its other charms. Few new restaurants succeed without the right context—the elusive combination of a built-in customer base, good location and high concept—and RedRocks hits all three notes.

Just weeks after its opening, tables are packed past 10 p.m. on weeknights, when the second of two nightly happy hours begins and a decidedly Roman atmosphere of celebration takes hold.

In crafting RedRocks, O'Brien said, he aimed "not to get too, too in the specialty feel, [but] to still have the neighborhood style ... I was hoping for

a nice balance and I think we're pretty close to achieving that."

Meanwhile, for those who prefer a less cheesy entrée, the menu offers grilled panini sandwiches and salads worth praising in their own right. A plate of broccoli rabe, the bitter and stalkier cousin of broccoli, is piquant when paired with a dressing of hot peppers, sea salt and garlic.

The oven-roasted fish, which parks next to the pizza pies to crackle in its juices, is on the small side but stunning. The branzino I sampled fell off the fork with tenderness, bringing to mind swordfish without the steaky texture. My companion particularly liked the seasonal salad of wild arugula and tiny tomatoes.

Baked olives with house-made bread double as a desirable bar-side order to go with one of RedRocks's quartet of rare beers on tap; dusky Belgian Chimay and bright, lemony Allagash White are standouts. O'Brien also offers a cocktail menu stocked with sleeper hits, 13 wines by the glass and 25 bottles of quirky microbrews that beg to be sampled.

"I was very indulgent when it came to the beer list," O'Brien said. "I didn't try to get too much into what's popular, just what's great-tasting." The Abita Purple Haze, Bar Harbor Blueberry and Rogue Dead Guy Ale are a sight for parched throats after a long day of work.

Desserts are available for any incurable sweet-tooths, but the true decadence of RedRocks comes out of the oven or in a pint glass. As the weather turns chillier and appetites heartier, RedRocks's pizza empire is bound to grow.

*RedRocks DC, 1036 Park Rd. NW.
(202) 506-1402. Monday-Thursday
5 p.m. to midnight; Friday 5 p.m. to
1 a.m.; Saturday 11 a.m. to 1 a.m.;
Sunday 11 a.m. to midnight.*

*Reservations not necessary, but
slight waits may exist.*