

Pizza as My Life

Letizia Airos (December 04, 2017)



Interview with Gino Sorbillo, who recently opened a new pizzeria in New York. During our conversation, Sorbillo tells us about Naples and New York, and we touch upon many different topics, such as his dreams, Mayor de Blasio visiting his pizzeria, singer Pino Daniele, his father's family of 20 pizza makers, young people leaving Naples, his stubbornness, and communication.

[Gino Sorbillo](#) [2] had just returned to Italy following the inauguration of his second location in New York. It was an event that had the whole city talking, especially thanks to Mayor Bill de Blasio's appearance at the opening. "Sorbillo Pizzeria" now takes its place next to the very successful "Zia Esterina."



We reached Sorbillo by phone upon his return to Naples. He spoke to us with all the candor and spontaneity that has made him not only a great interpreter of Neapolitan pizza but also an authentic communicator.

It's impossible not to talk right away about Mayor Bill de Blasio's visit...

"He's always been very nice to me, and I immediately felt a strong esteem towards him.

It's very important to me that the mayor of such an important city is friends with a simple pizzamaker...

During one of his previous trips to Italy, he left his security detail perplexed when he wanted to stop along the boardwalk in Naples. Stop where exactly? At my pizzeria... It was a true demonstration of humility."

You did something in Naples for his reelection. Could you tell us about it?

"As soon as I found out, I gave away a lot of pizze a portafoglio (folded pizzas that resemble wallets). The same type that Mayor de Blasio had when he visited. He promised he would come visit if I were ever to open a pizzeria here in NY."

And he was a man of his word!

"It was like seeing a friend. We hugged each other; it wasn't a formal greeting...

We went in the back. He wanted to go behind the counter, and we put the pizza in the oven together. Then he ate it while sitting on a stool. Just as any friend would."

It's a pizzeria among friends, just like the one in Naples. How is it working in New York? What's different in respect to Italy?

"If you give a lot, New York gives you a lot in return. I'm trying not to change my work. I'm just trying to carry it out as I have always done."

Is it difficult to make pizza in New York? Authentic pizza, I mean. What are the difficulties you've encountered?

"It's hard to find the raw materials. I mainly worry about being able to make the pizza the way I've always made it. I really enjoy discovering new things and exploring the market, but the most important thing to me is not Americanizing my pizza."

I imagine that's a difficult balance to keep. A real challenge. You're known as the "pizza artist." How important is your creativity? How do you combine creativity and tradition?

"If you really know where the pizza comes from and you really know tradition, you can be creative, and you can think about ways to reinterpret it. It can be done.

People make mistakes sometimes because they reinvent their products from scratch. I'm of the school of thought that there's nothing to reinvent. If we know how to look back, we can add to the past."

It's as if pizza were a living thing and a true creative moment for you.

"Yes, pizza is an edible work of art that changes with the times... We certainly don't make the same pizza from 30 or 50 years ago... Evolution is involved even when it comes to pizza. The important thing is to not undervalue the tradition that evolves... It should never stray too far from the path..."

So it's a continuous path...



"Exactly. When someone wants to make comparisons in a serious way, I'm there to listen. I'm here to communicate the characteristics of our pizza. But if the attitude is to criticize our pizza, my response is that Neapolitan pizza will only keep coming out stronger and stronger... I'm referring to something that happened a few years ago. I can now say that I was right. That's exactly what happened... Some people in the northern Italy had tried to criticize real Neapolitan pizza. Their attempt failed."

You bring pizza to the world but also to you own city, Naples.

"Naples is a land of many contradictions, but if you know how to tune out the bad, and if you have good intentions, Naples represents inspiration."

A true inspiration. We know it here too, and it's in the imaginations of many Americans.

Let's tell anyone reading in Naples what your day today consisted of. What did you do before this interview with me?

"I was with Rai shooting a Christmas song that will air on December 24. It's a surprise with my city of Naples. I can't say any more."

Regarding communicating Naples to others, there's an artist who we met personally and who we both love. He told about this city in the most genuine, and at the same time brilliant, way possible. His name is Pino Daniele.

I was told that when Bill de Blasio came into your pizzeria, one of Daniele's discs was playing in the background. Right away the Mayor said, "I know Pino Daniele." How much does his music still live on in your life?

"His daughter and his wife still visit me to eat. I grew up with his songs."

I always get upset because I think he could have been saved. I miss him a lot even though we're always singing his music every day in Naples. He told the world about Naples in a way that few people knew how to do."

Let's turn back to pizza. When did it first come into your life?

"It came into my life in a silent way, as if it were life itself. I was never forced to be pizza maker. It's a result of what my life has been. In my family, my father had 20 siblings who all became pizza makers. Because of this, we grew up in a certain way."

A lot of your family has left Naples though...

"Yes, my father thought that even I was going to leave Naples someday in order to work. My siblings did it because of the mob, but that wasn't a good reason for me because I consider myself a good person. If something happens I denounce it."

You've become a point of reference for many young people. Let's get back to New York. Imagine you were personally delivering your pizza to someone. Who would you like to deliver it to?

"My dream would be to give it to Madonna. I would do anything for that."

Your life shows that dreams can come true.

"Yes, I knew how to dream. If you want to make them come true though, you need to be a bit crazy..."

Then at a certain point in your life, you understand you can make your dream come true. This is the



time to do it, even if it's a risk. You shouldn't just let it sit in a drawer."

Is there any pizza that you like in particular?

"I really like the Calzone..."

"Can you explain to us what it is?"

"The Calzone is a classic Neapolitan pizza that's stuffed and closed.

Inside, you put ricotta and provola under fiordilatte. Then you put tomatoes and salami. Then you close it with a bit of oil, pepper, and a basil leaf. It's cooked at the stokehole of the oven in order to ensure it's cooked deeply and not superficially..."

With the tone of voice he uses to describe it, you can almost taste it in your mouth...

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