

• Pizza Americana •

Pizza remained a Neapolitan speciality, however. As late as the 1970s it was still largely unknown in the north of Italy. For its current status as a truly international food, we have to thank American fast-food franchises.

Italian immigrants and American soldiers stationed in Naples during the Second World War had taken the pizza to the States, at about the same time as the McDonald brothers began introducing assembly-line production methods into the restaurant business. Several chains hit upon the idea of marketing 'ethnic' food in the same way, and suddenly Tex-Mex and pizza joints sprang up all over the place. By 1970 Americans were eating two billion pizzas annually, and exporting their version of the Neapolitan pizza throughout the world.

Of course, the American pizza bears only a passing resemblance to its Italian cousin. With its light, elastic crust and deliberately sparse ingredients, the Neapolitan pizza can come as a surprise. Eisenhower certainly thought so, and caused a diplomatic incident when he said he'd tasted better pizza in New York than Naples.

I had no intention of causing another diplomatic stand-off. Most great chefs, food critics and cookbook writers still insist that Naples is the place for pizza. If I was to have any chance of creating a decent pizza, I had to go there and see for myself.

THE QUEST FOR THE BEST

• The Secret of San Marzano •

In *Treasures of the Italian Table*, Burton Anderson notes that, 'It has been said that if Naples had managed to patent the pizza it would now be among Italy's wealthiest cities instead of one of its poorest.' Perhaps that is why, a little late in the day, the Neapolitans are trying to protect their product against pale imitations (to say nothing of the viler variants that have been foisted upon us, such as Pizza Hawaii with its chunks of tepid pineapple). The Associazione Vera Pizza Napoletana has drawn up a code that regulates every aspect of preparing the proper pizza, from the exact heat of the oven to the techniques employed to knead the dough. The grade of flour, the types of cheese, the kinds of tomato – each part of the process is specified in minute detail. And there are now moves to get the Neapolitan pizza included in the list of products recognised by the EU as traditional specialities, and effectively copyrighted as such. This might seem heavily traditionalist, and counter to a spirit of adventure, but to me it was very encouraging. Although I could never hope to emulate the lengthy apprenticeship of the *pizzaiolo* (pizza-maker), here at least was a blueprint for the perfect Margherita and marinara. Surely this was a short cut to success. I flew to Italy full of confidence.

The Italians are passionate about their food. This was borne out almost as soon as I touched down in Naples. In the bus from the airport the driver began arguing about the best pizza, insisting that the Neapolitan product was superior. 'It's the way the *pizzaiolo* works the dough,' he declared, 'and the silkiness of the mozzarella, the juiciness of the San Marzano tomato.' For Italians, food is not just the stuff of life but an everyday drama, a ritual to be enacted and enjoyed,



a communal celebration. This is part of what makes their cuisine great, but the mythical status accorded to much of their food makes it almost impossible to separate fact from fiction. Marco Polo, for example, is credited with the discovery of many foodstuffs, even though the dates often deny this. Similarly, people claim the Margherita was invented for the queen, yet it pre-dates Raffaele Esposito's excursion to Capodimonte. In Italy, it seems, the bigger and better the story, the more it has to be taken with a large pinch of salt (any kind: the Associazione offers no stipulations here).

So it was with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that I set out from the headquarters of Solania, one of the top producers of canned San Marzano tomatoes in Italy. My bus driver wasn't alone in his esteem for the San Marzano: almost every Neapolitan I met said it was the best tomato for pizza, and I'd come across several Italian chefs who were gripped by nostalgia at the mere mention of its name. The celebrated Marcella Hazan says that the authentic flavour of Naples pizza owes much to the San Marzano. Could it possibly live up to the hype – or would it turn out to be just another story?

Our simple trip to the tomato fields was, of course, turned into ritual and drama. By the time we had bumped our way down the rutted track at the end of our journey, we were part of a motorcade that included members of the Italian press (Solania's general manager had a keen eye for any publicity opportunity) and a local government dignitary. The pomp and circumstance seemed at odds with the rustic setting: the fields spreading out haphazardly, like allotments, with tumbledown huts and sagging netting attached to staves.

If you could bottle romance alongside the product, the San Marzano tomato would undoubtedly be the most delicious in the world. The fields lay in a wide valley between the steep green ridges of the Picentini and Lattari mountains. In the background loomed the stubby peak of Vesuvius, familiar from hundreds of photographs, paintings and engravings – the inescapable, brooding symbol of Naples. Occasionally a tiny Piaggio van trundled past, its flatbed stacked with sheaves of freshly washed rocket, but most of the time the only sound was the low moan of wind. At midday the church bells rang out the *mezzogiorno*, as they have for centuries.

The fieldworkers, too, looked as though they had stepped out of an old photograph – especially the women, who wore brightly patterned aprons over shapeless dark skirts. Both sexes had close-cropped hair and weather-beaten brown faces that signalled a lifetime spent working out of doors. They were all old: the San Marzano is a notoriously delicate tomato – it needs constant, careful tending (*com' un bambino* – like a child) and the harvesting has to take place by hand; it's back-breaking work, and the young simply aren't interested.

This isn't the only factor jeopardising the tomato's future: over time the soil has lost much of its ability to hold water and now needs an elaborate system of pipes and irrigation to support it. This worsens the fragile economics of a fruit that's difficult to grow, and already there is strong competition in the area from hardier varieties. A hybrid has been developed from Chinese seeds: the tomatoes give a higher yield but they're not the pure San Marzano. Locals contemptuously dismiss them as 'Chinese balls', but you can see that the bravado hides a certain anxiety.

