

# Authentic expectations

*Consumer demand for genuine, unique recipes is growing every day*

BY JULIE FITZ-GERALD

There is a change happening in the pizza industry, a culinary evolution that is seeing an increased demand for authentic and regional-style pizzas. Grabbing a quick slice to satisfy a craving has morphed into friends lining up on a Saturday night to indulge in century-old dough recipes and gourmet toppings that are baked to perfection in a wood-fired oven. It doesn't get much more authentic than this.

A report issued by Technomic in April found that pizza consumption in the United States has risen by more than 50 per cent in the last two years, with demand for authenticity and regional specialties emerging as growing trends. The report also found that 34 per cent of consumers are willing to pay more for gourmet pizza ingredients, up from 22 per cent in 2010, while 57 per cent of those surveyed want restaurants and pizzerias to offer premium pizzas on their menus.

Sara Monette, director of consumer research at Technomic, says that consumers are being driven by an appreciation for unique products. "Looking more broadly at the trend of what's making people want more authentic pizza, it's more about a call for the uniqueness in the things that they spend their money on and the food that they are willing to purchase."

Perhaps one of the most sought-after regional pizzas is the Neapolitan. Cooked in a wood-fired dome oven at approximately 900 F, the crust has a charred, blistered effect while still being soft and chewy. The all-natural, fresh and non-processed ingredients that make up an authentic Neapolitan pizza include type 00 flour, San Marzano tomatoes, fresh Fiore di Latte or buffalo mozzarella, basil, extra-virgin olive oil, sea salt and yeast. The Neapolitan-style pizza is so coveted that an international non-profit organization known as Associazione Vera Pizza Napoletana (VPN) was formed in 1984 to cultivate the culinary art of Neapolitan pizza making. VPN Americas is responsible for certifying Neapolitan-style pizzerias across Canada and the United States, with 10 pizzerias in Canada having already received this designation for meeting the strict guidelines.

While Neapolitan pizza is the only style to have its own regulating body, other regional pies are just as distinct in their characteristics. Consumers are extremely savvy when it comes to the claims of specific regional pizzas, such as New York-style, Chicago deep-dish and Detroit-style pies, to name just a few. If a pizzeria touts New York-style pizza as its specialty, customers are going to expect hand-tossed,



One of the biggest factors for consumers in determining authenticity is simply whether or not they buy your story.



oversized, foldable slices with just the right amount of sauce and cheese. If an establishment advertises Detroit-style pizza, the offerings had better be a square, deep-dish crust with a fried crispy texture on the outside and a chewy inner crust, topped with marinara sauce. Anything less will not be tolerated.

Similarly, if a restaurant has carved out a niche for Chicago-style pizza, customers will expect a round, deep-dish, pan-baked pie loaded with toppings and chunky tomato sauce, more suitable for eating with a knife and fork than your hands.

There is no margin for error when it comes to authentic regional offerings. Consumers are knowledgeable and, if their expectations are not met, they will take to their mobile phones and computers, letting everyone know of their disappointment. The Internet is rife with blogs and social media updates from pizza-lovers who revel in spreading the word about which pizzerias get it right and which ones earn a failing grade. Monette refers to this information-sharing generation of foodies as the “millennial generation.” They range in age from 20 to 35 years and are characterized by their constant quest for unique foods and new flavours, and their love of social networking. “Talking about your latest trip to a new restaurant or a new menu item that you tried is very common and people want to be part of that conversation, so I think a lot of that leads to consumers looking for more unique options as well,” she explains.

Enter the montanara: the American incarnation of an ancient Naples recipe where dough is flash-fried, then topped with ragù and cheese. In the United States, the dough is finished in the oven, giving it an airier crust and turning it into a modern-day bestseller. Pizzerias around the United States are carving out their niche market by putting the wildly popular montanara on their menus and consumers just can't seem to get enough.

While Canadian preferences for pizza seem to run the gamut as far as regional styles are concerned, there is a common thread that links them all together: If pizzerias are promoting unique and regional styles, they must deliver on these promises. As Monette explains, authenticity in the pizza market is a trend that is here to stay. “Consumers are not only interested in food, but they are more ethnically diverse and populations are too, so they're looking for that authentic experience. As they look for greater value, they look at what a restaurant does to differentiate itself from another. I see that as something that restaurants are going to have to continue to do. You can't offer the same old pizza and stay competitive in this market.”

With the bombardment of sensational advertising and stretched truths that consumers face every day, it's no wonder that the demand for genuine, authentic products is on the rise, and those products include pizza. If pizzeria-owners can meet their clients' expectations, they are sure to capitalize on the growing trend of authenticity. •

Julie Fitz-Gerald is a freelance writer based in Uxbridge, Ont., and a regular contributor to *Canadian Pizza*.

### FOOD AND IDENTITY

The Institute of European Studies at Berkeley University of California hosted two events in 2010 that explored food cultures and history and resulted in the report, *Food: History and Culture in the West*. The paper raises an interesting point in its overview in that “it has become more difficult to know where our food comes from, and consequently, harder to feel connected to it.” Perhaps this is part of the reason people gravitate towards a tangible food source they can bring to life through story or even through the reality of its existence in their own backyard. It's understandable that people would feel so lost when you consider the meaning of food in a social context. Darra Goldstein, founding editor of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, noted that one of the important ideas to come from a working group with the Council of Europe was that food is a “social process rather than a commodity and thus central to multicultural understanding.”