

LIFE OF SLICE

OH, PIZZA. THAT MOST BELOVED OF ENTRÉES. WHILE THERE ARE AS MANY WAYS TO ENJOY PIZZA AS THERE ARE HUMAN BEINGS, THESE OKLAHOMA RESTAURANTS KNOW HOW TO DO PIE RIGHT.

YOU KNOW WHAT they say about pizza, right? “Even when it’s bad, it’s pretty good.” But with respect to whoever coined that saying, there is such a thing as bad pizza, and it is an insult to good pizzas everywhere to say otherwise. Even reduced to the bare minimum of what is considered pizza—crust, sauce, and cheese—there is so much that can go wrong. *Even when it’s bad, it’s pretty good* belies the pure hubris of the modern pizza-consuming public. Wet, underdone dough; a sickly sweet sauce that’s more grease than tomato; a layer of flavorless cheese congealed into a thick dairy tile studded with mealy toppings—pizza can go awry in so many ways.

Yet the existence of a nadir also demands the existence of an apex. By and large, most pizzas fall into a thick band of acceptable pies. But there is an upper crust, if you will, of Oklahomans dedicated to elevating the craft of pizza to delicious art.

BY GREG ELWELL

The gourmet pies at Andolini’s Pizzeria have been coveted by Oklahoma diners since the restaurant’s first location opened in 2005. Andolini’s has been a consistent winner of awards both local and national.

VALERIE WEHHAAS

IF YOU ASK fans of Empire Slice House about the pizza, be prepared for a deluge of superlatives. But the Oklahoma City pizzeria's cofounder Rachel Cope knows the secret: Before opening, she and cofounder Avery Cannon's first attempts at pizza were less than convincing to their landlords.

"We did a tasting, and it did not go as we wanted," she says. "The appetizers and stuff were great, but the star of the show was not."

But with her heart set on the Plaza District space, Cope, with the support of her family, in 2012 attended the International School of Pizza in California with thirteen-time World Pizza Champion Tony Gemignani.

"It gave me a new respect for the craft," she says. "As soon as I got home, I taught everything I had just learned to Avery so we wouldn't forget it."

Right, Savastano's Pizzeria specializes not just in Chicago-style pies but other dishes—like gnocchi and lasagna—that founder and Chicago native Frank Savastano loved from his hometown.



VALERIE WEI-HAAS

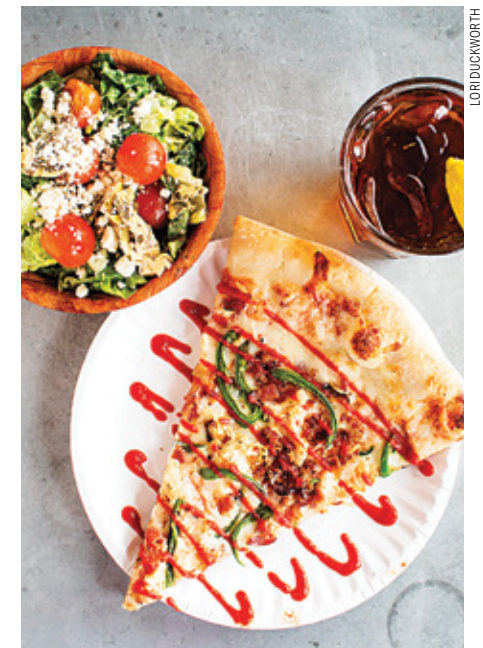
For Mike and Jim Bausch, the team of brothers behind Tulsa's Andolini's Pizzeria, success means putting food quality first and figuring out the rest afterwards.

"We're not trying to be New York-style. We're not aping anyone else. We want to make great Italian cuisine," Mike says. "We pull our own mozzarella fresh every day, twice a day, in all our stores. People thought we were crazy to make our own sausage, but I said, 'If we can trust eighteen-year olds to defeat the Nazis, I think we trust them to make sausage.' Anything we can't make ourselves, we're not doing."

That sounds extreme, but it's a philosophy that has paid off. Andolini's opened in 2005 and since has expanded into six locations—the original in Owasso, three in Tulsa, one in Jenks, one in Broken Arrow—plus a food truck.

But that's only success in a business sense. Bausch is much more concerned with making customers the best pizza they've ever tasted. The Demarco of Brooklyn is a master class in cheese pizza. Sitting atop the chewy, pliant crust are a sauce of rare San Marzano tomatoes, a layer of fresh mozzarella, fresh basil, a sprinkle of nutty Pecorino Romano cheese, and a drizzle of first-pressing extra-virgin olive oil.

"I can't imagine someone eating this pizza and not saying, 'This is what a cheese pizza should be,'" he says. "I want people to



LORIDUCKWORTH

The Empire Slice House lunch special gets diners a half salad, drink, and slice of pizza—like this Foghorn Leghorn with sweet marinara, roasted chicken, jalapeños, and bacon with a drizzle of Sriracha—for 9 dollars.

know that when we recommend something, it's because we're excited about it, and we hope you are as well."

Andolini's isn't trying to be New York-style, but Bixby-born Savastano's Pizzeria and Restaurant is very clear about its inspiration. Founders Frank and Jane Savastano met at a pizzeria in Chicago. It was Frank's lifelong dream to own his own pizza place. They moved their family to Oklahoma in 1993 so Frank could take an IT job at Amoco Oil, and when he left the job in 2002, he asked Jane, "Can I have a pizzeria now?" In 2003, with their daughter Jennifer, they opened Savastano's in Bixby—an eighteen-table restaurant that was never big enough, Jane says. They stayed there six years before moving into a much larger storefront in Tulsa, and though Frank died in August 2020, his place still brings in eager customers.

Much like the Andolini's piemakers, the Savastano family is dedicated to doing everything themselves, including their famous homemade Italian sausage, of which they make up to sixty-five pounds daily.

"Even people who say they don't like sausage will still eat ours," Jane says.

Empire Slice House opened in September 2013 and quickly became a hit for its inventive combinations of toppings like the Ghostface Killah—a pie with pepperoni, poblano pepper, and crushed barbecue potato chips over a ghost chili marinara sauce. That sense of playfulness coupled with a focus on flavor may be what brought Empire its biggest accolade to date.

"I got a phone call from a number I didn't know," Cope says. "The voice on the other end said, 'This is *Pizza Today* magazine. We just wanted you to know you were named Independent Pizzeria of the Year.' I pulled over. I couldn't believe it. It meant a lot to us that what we're doing is unique."



WHILE COPE AND crew went the PhD-in-pizza route, *DIY* is the name of the game for a pair of Tulsa-area pizzerias.

Andolini's second location in Tulsa's Cherry Street District opened in 2011, but its first location was in Owasso. It also has additional locations in Tulsa, Jenks, and Broken Arrow.

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Clockwise from above: the Combination pie at Jo's Famous Pizza in Purcell. Kathy Andrews co-owns Jo's with her son Adam. Grateful Head Pizza Oven & Tap Room serves a variety of pies and provides ample outdoor seating. Saucee Sicilian takes its wood-fired pizzas on the road in its food truck.

That may help those who misunderstand what Chicago-style pizza really is.

"All of our pizza is Chicago-style, but that doesn't mean it's all deep dish," Jennifer says. "But the deep dish is two inches thick. It really is a pie."

Unlike some deep-dish pizzas, Savastano's version is sturdy enough to be eaten by hand—though most use a knife and fork—and the pounds of cheese along with a mountain of toppings means that no one will be leaving the table hungry. That would be heartening to Frank, Jane says.

"He was a lucky man. He got to live his dream, and it was awesome," she says. "He loved to share his food with everybody."



THOSE WHO LOVE The Saucee Sicilian's pizzas can thank Priscilla Jones for inspiring the celebrated Oklahoma City food truck. Her son Gannon Mendez, Saucee's owner and head chef, says part of the impetus for starting the business was finding something to bring his mother closer to the rest of the family.

"I was sick of the corporate world," he says. "Mom was retired in Colorado, so I said, 'Let's build a food truck and do this.'"

The family fun is on full display. Jones—who prefers to be called Nonna—is known to tell dirty jokes while taking orders.

"I work with my wife and my mom, and we're your typical Italian family," Mendez says. "We'll look like we're having a knock-down, drag-out in front of customers like it's nothing, but it's just what we do."

The show is entertaining, but it's a distant second to the quality of the pizza. Saucee serves Neapolitan-style pizzas—thin pies on flavorful, stretchy dough that cook in about ninety seconds each. The wood-fired oven in the truck sits at around 850 degrees Fahrenheit—a fire that can take five hours to heat up from scratch—and while it's meant to fit two pizzas at a time, Saucee's staff regularly juggles six or seven, constantly turning and shifting them to ensure nothing is burned.

"In my defense, I didn't think we'd be busy," Mendez says of the oven overload.

As he and his family prepare to add a brick-and-mortar location to their already

lively food-truck business, Mendez is looking forward to cooking in a new oven that can handle as many as twenty pizzas at once. And once diners taste Saucee's flavor combinations, they're sure to order more.

"Ever since we started, we've had to spend time explaining our menu to people, because Oklahomans don't necessarily know much about cured Italian meats," he says. That the Tusa—made with red sauce spiked with Sambal chili oil and topped with mozzarella, hot capicola and *soppresata*, Nonna's Italian sausage, and mushrooms—is a big seller makes it clear he doesn't have to sell customers too hard.

Of course, part of the blame for more recent long lines might fall at the feet of Food Network personality Guy Fieri, who featured The Saucee Sicilian on an episode of *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* in May 2020.



IT MIGHT NOT be legal to talk about pizza in Oklahoma without addressing The Hideaway in Stillwater. Though they share the same DNA, The Hideaway

is the first, still owned by the family of founder Richard Dermer, while the Hideaway Pizza chain was started—with Dermer's blessing—by former employees who have since grown the brand into a regional powerhouse. But plenty of people still go out of their way to visit the original, says The Hideaway general manager Stephanie Dermer.

"The main focus is quality," she says. "We've been making the dough in the same way, in the same ovens, for sixty-three years. They don't make those ovens anymore. It's hard to keep them up, but it gives us the product our customers want."

It's been that way since 1957, when Richard, Stephanie's grandfather, then an English major at Oklahoma State University, got a loan from his father and went into business with his brother-in-law. Every pizza is perfect in its imperfections, thanks in part to those decades-old deck-style ovens that require employees to watch each pie closely so they can move them at just the right time for an even crust. But Stephanie wasn't always as wild about the family business as she is now.

"For a long time, I was kind of burned out on pizza," she says. "Every birthday or big family event, we had Hideaway. I'd eat sides. It wasn't until I left that I learned to appreciate The Hideaway's pizza."

Oddly, she's several years behind many of the restaurant's fans, who are so devoted that even the smallest change is noticeable.

"Because of COVID, it has been hard to get certain ingredients like our regular sausage," she says. "So we got some new stuff in, and everyone noticed. Everyone. We only had to substitute it for a week, but the guests could tell the difference."

Only dedication can give rise to such a picky palate. One of The Hideaway's regulars orders a small sausage pizza every day.

"We have a lot of regulars," Stephanie says. "Some will drive in from out of town once a week, and they always get the same thing, but this customer—well, we get concerned if we don't hear from him."



THE TALE OF Hochatown's Grateful Head Pizza Oven & Tap Room isn't

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I WAS SICK OF THE CORPORATE WORLD SO I SAID, 'LET'S BUILD A FOOD TRUCK AND DO THIS.' THE FAMILY FUN IS ON FULL DISPLAY.



“Other pizza places have seen how well we’ve done and come to town,” she says. “Pizza Hut, Mazzio’s, Domino’s—Purcell’s not as small as it used to be, but we don’t need four pizza places. Still, our business hasn’t suffered.”

That’s because it’s a different clientele. Regulars stick with Jo’s because it’s been there since 1962, when it was called Cha’Ray’s Pizza. And crowds from Dallas, Norman, Ada, Chickasha, Oklahoma City, and more aren’t driving all the way to Purcell for the same chain pizza they can get closer to home.

Jo passed away in 2011, but Kathy and the family continue to keep the business running. And while Jo and Kathy learned about making pizza at Cha’Ray’s, the recipe evolved until it became the classic customers love today.

“I’ve tried to honor her traditions and her quality,” Andrews says. “More important than making a profit is making sure we’re giving our customers the best pizza we can.”

That includes some moves that are unusual for the industry. While most pizza places brag about making dough fresh each day, Jo’s ages its dough for three days to give it the perfect taste and texture. And while both the dough and the sauce are closely held recipes, each crispy bite of crust has a mild sweetness that is luscious on the palate.

And because it’s a family-owned small business, customers have a few more options they can’t get from pizza chains—like the option to choose toppings by the quarter or ask for the dough to be a little thicker or thinner.

“Whatever they want, if we can do it, we try to accommodate our customers,” Andrews says.

And despite the fact that pizza could be a divider—it seems there are almost as many opinions about crust, toppings, and sauce as there are human beings—pizza is a food of joy and celebration. The term *pizza party* is proof of that. Pizza is a communal food, far more so than burgers or tacos, because it’s a dish that is meant to be shared. Call it the People’s Pie: Pizza bridges the gap in divided times. 🍕

ANDOLINI'S PIZZERIA

- 1552 East Fifteenth Street in Tulsa
- (918) 728-6111
- 114 South Detroit Avenue in Tulsa
- (918) 960-2011
- Inside Mother Road Market, 1124 South Lewis Avenue in Tulsa
- (918) 240-1970
- 500 Riverwalk Terrace in Jenks
- (918) 701-3701
- 222 South Main Street in Broken Arrow
- (918) 940-2770
- 12140 East Ninety-sixth Street in Owasso
- (918) 272-9328
- andopizza.com

EMPIRE SLICE HOUSE / EMPIRE SLICE SHOP

- 1804 Northwest Sixteenth Street, Oklahoma City
- 1125 Northwest Sixty-third Street, Nichols Hills
- (405) 557-1760
- 417 North Main Street, Tulsa
- (918) 551-6669
- empireslicehouse.com

GRATEFUL HEAD PIZZA OVEN & TAP ROOM

- 10251 U.S. Highway 259 in Broken Bow
- (580) 494-6030
- gratefulheadpizza.com

THE HIDEAWAY

- 230 South Knoblock Street in Stillwater
- (405) 372-4777
- thehideaway.net

JO'S FAMOUS PIZZA

- 1438 South Green Avenue in Purcell
- (405) 527-2379
- 900 South Kelly Avenue in Edmond
- (405) 340-7070
- josfamouspizza.com

THE SAUCEE SICILIAN

- thesauceesicilian.com
- Find the food truck’s location at [instagram.com/thesauceesicilian](https://www.instagram.com/thesauceesicilian)

SAVASTANO'S PIZZERIA

- 8211 East Regal Place in Tulsa
- (918) 369-9387
- savastanospizzeria.com

The Hideaway Special at The Hideaway includes a different topping on each slice.

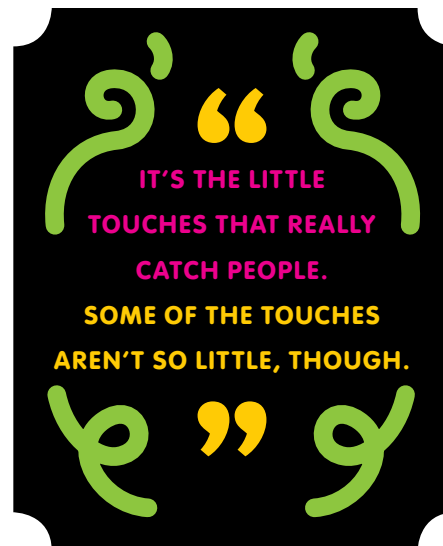
quite as mythic as The Hideaway’s. Yet. But brothers Billy and Kevin Carper have built their own fandom over the last decade. Part of that success comes from a prime location in southeastern Oklahoma’s hottest resort area, but the rest is a decade of hard work and community support.

“We’ve made pizzas at home forever, and that’s the experience we want customers to have—like they were invited into our house for dinner,” Billy says. “It’s the little touches that really catch people, like the way we make our own garlic butter and brush it on the crusts.”

Some of the touches aren’t so little, though. Grateful Head is known for its tasty, rustic pies that are so heavily laden with toppings that slices can be hard to pick up. Whole cherry tomatoes and entire black olives are eye-catching and add an intensity to the flavor, Kevin says.

“We’ve had a few people complain that we’re too lazy to chop up our toppings, but that’s just how we do it,” Billy says.

The top sellers are the Psychedelic Supremo and Dire Wolf pies. The former is a hefty supreme pizza and the latter an all-meat powerhouse that goes beyond the usual proteins by adding bacon and salami to the mix. Around Independence Day, it’s not uncommon for



Grateful Head to push out four thousand pizzas a week, but even on a regular day in Hochatown, visitors are likely to see the restaurant’s signature box poking out of just about every trash bin in town.

“Pizza and beer is a simple gig,” Kevin says, “but it’s a busy gig.”



S MALL-TOWN PIZZERIAS LIKE Grateful Head might not hit the same volumes as their big-city counterparts, but they make a bigger splash per capita, says Kathy Andrews, owner of Jo’s Famous Pizza in Purcell and sister of its namesake, Jo Ellen Powers.