

Juliana's Life of Pie

Grizzled pizza legend Patsy Grimaldi returns to Old Fulton Street

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Frank would approve.

Details:

Juliana's

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Patsy Grimaldi has no interest in the theater of pizza making, the stunts that draw in the crowds. Stroll down Old Fulton Street, by the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, and you won't catch the cooks of his newly opened pizzeria, [Juliana's](#), throwing the dough toward the ceiling, turning it on their fists in the air, or stretching it into shape. "I don't like to see my guys abuse the dough," Grimaldi says on the phone. His cooks work quietly by the oven in the back, coaxing out flat disks on the counter with soft pressure from their fingers. "They got to be gentle," he says. "They got to get it even all the way around."

At 81, Grimaldi is tall with combed silver hair and a tanned, deeply wrinkled face. He moves with a younger man's energy, weaving around tables, wearing black sneakers and a leather bomber, stepping to the tune of "Mack the Knife." Grimaldi came up in the 1940s, making pizza beside his uncle Patsy Lancieri, who had been trained at the original Lombardi's, New York City's first Neapolitan pie shop. He still believes in putting the sauce on last, after the cheese has been set down,

an old-timer move. "That way the mozzarell don't dry out or burn," he says, leaving off the last syllable. The tomato sauce protects the cheese like sunblock. It is sweet, pale, and creamy, even after a blast in the 800-degree oven. Grimaldi's wife of 42 years, Carol, comes in six days a week, sometimes making the fresh mozzarella herself.

To those who make a living baking, an oven is more than a big, hot box. It's a complex tool with personality and infuriating quirks that eats coal, in this case, and breathes out merciless heat. Learning to make consistently beautiful pies is about harnessing an oven's power. "It can take a long time," says Grimaldi, and he knows. He managed this oven when he opened a parlor in this exact spot back in 1990, but later sold the Grimaldi name to Frank Ciolli. Ciolli expanded the Grimaldi's single parlor into a national chain and still runs a Grimaldi's location on the block (he shuffled it over to the corner space in 2011). Although Ciolli filed a suit to prevent Patsy Grimaldi from reopening here, the court ruled in Patsy's favor. Juliana's is an unlikely, mid-retirement comeback to the New York pizza scene.

The pies are milky white on top, the cheese in thick, Rubenesque proportion, smudged with a clean, bright red sauce and a few wilted basil leaves. The bottoms are brown as if the char were painted on in watercolors, and each bite carries the flavor of the oven without being scarred by it—the crust has a thin shell of crispness, but it's soft and chewy inside.

All of Juliana's pies are remarkably straightforward, gently flavored. Even the specials, which sound as if they'd be loaded with toppings, show a bit of restraint. The Number 4 (\$21) gets a bare crumble of sweet sausage and a few tiny leaves of broccoli rabe, clinging to some memory of garlic. The whole

thing is padded with more of that mozzarella. There are a few salads on the tables at Juliana's, and maybe here and there an order of fried calamari (\$8), but most people have come for the pizza, served hot, raised on metal pedestals.

What's a parlor without a couple of slouchy teenagers, straws in their soda, looping fingers under the table. And a table of grave men in shining leather jackets, happily carving their slices with forks and knives. As the evening winds down, Grimaldi walks around with an unlit cigar in his hands, and a man with a huge belly pulls a chair over to the jukebox to get the music going again. (Sinatra, obviously. Always Sinatra.)

There are families with young children here, too, and a couple that met up straight from work, now deciding whether to wrap the extra slices for lunch or polish them off. And, of course, there's a kid twirling strings of melted cheese on her fingers, marveling at the elasticity of hot mozzarella, annoying the hell out of her siblings. Juliana's delights are simple.

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