

Ed Levine, February 4, 2013

I have been eating Patsy Grimaldi's pizza for a long, long time. How long? Long enough to have [thoroughly enjoyed his pizza before the added emotional spice of pizza lawsuits](#). Long enough to have eaten the pies that he himself made in the original incarnation of **Grimaldi's**, back in 1990 when it was still called **Patsy's**. Long enough to have engaged in lengthy conversations with Patsy and his wife Carol at the Corona Heights Pork Store, where they used to buy their mozzarella and sausage from [Frankie Capezza](#) in the '90s. Long enough to know that Patsy started to learn his craft in 1941 at his uncle's East Harlem pizzeria, the truly original Patsy's. So you can imagine how excited I was when I heard that Patsy and Carol were coming out of retirement and embarking on yet another comeback, returning to run the show at his original location under yet another name: **Juliana's**, after his late mother.

Only this time the pizzaolo wasn't only trying to reclaim his reputation from the Ciolli family, to whom he sold his original **Grimaldi's** location and naming rights, and who, when Patsy reclaimed his Front Street location this year, had the temerity to open right next door. He was also trying to guarantee his entrance into the pantheon of great pizzaioli everywhere—the 'Keepers of the Flame,' as I called them in [Slice of Heaven](#).

This is not just pizza lore worthy of headlines in the food press; this is the stuff worthy of the full Hollywood treatment. Blood money, pizza, longstanding grudges, manipulative lawsuits, and, most importantly, issues of honor and reputation.

Juliana's is simply furnished, its walls devoid of typical pizzeria memorabilia. Sinatra is, of course, the music of choice. It was mostly empty at 1:00 on a Friday afternoon, and among the absent were Patsy and Carol.

We ordered three pies. A white pizza with ricotta, mozzarella, and garlic; a half meatball, half plain; and my litmus test pie from my *Slice of Heaven* days: half sausage, half mushroom.

The white pie arrived first, and it was probably the best of the three. There was enough lift on the light, not-as-bready-as-I-remember crust, and the piece I tore from the edge had a lovely hole structure. Crispy on the outside, tender on the inside, the just-chewy-enough bread had the sure-fire signs of pizza greatness. The air bubbles were plentiful, if not particularly big, and the underside was darkened with plenty of black spots. The mozzarella was fine; the ricotta was creamy. The bits of still-raw garlic, on the other hand, were a discordant note.

The meatball pie's crust was significantly less elevated and the meatballs were dense, dry, and undersalted. I've become fond of meatball pies, but not this one. The biggest problem was the gumminess of the inner crust, which was undercooked and overwhelmed by toppings. The outside crust was good; then again, that's the easiest part to get right. At least the sauce of crushed, steamed tomatoes was made from excellent imported Italian tomatoes.

The half sausage, half mushroom was a fine pie. The sausage, from [lavarone Bros.](#), was nicely chunked and had plenty of fennel seeds. The mushrooms turned out to be a pleasantly surprising

combination of cremini and shiitake, and the crust had the crunchy-tender duality that I crave in all great pizza.

As we were leaving, Carol Grimaldi walked in and gave me a hug. I asked after her husband. She said he'd been sick for the last couple of weeks and hadn't been in much, except when a customer phoned in an order for twenty pies on the sole condition that Patsy make them himself. Now that's my idea of a brilliant take-out order.

All in all, what I found at Juliana's was pretty damn good pizza. Not transcendent, the way that Patsy Grimaldi's pizza was when he first started out and was personally manning the ovens, but probably worth a journey. It's definitely pizza that dwarfs the competition next door, so if his first goal was to show the world that Juliana's could produce better pizza than the Ciolli family, he's more than succeeded.

But in order for him to stake his rightful claim to 'Keeper of the Flame' status, the pizza has to be better. That means that Patsy has to be at Juliana's day in and day out. Sadly, in three visits that Serious Eats writers paid to Juliana's in the last month, all on different dates and times of day, there was not one Patsy Grimaldi sighting. Even if Patsy isn't going to be manning the oven full-time—he is, after all, in his eighties—he needs to supervise his staff and give the thumbs-up to every pie coming out of that oven. I've seen the man in action, and Patsy Grimaldi is a phenomenal one-person pizza quality control department. I've seen him dress down more than a few aspiring pizzaioli.

In the end, I'm thrilled to have Patsy Grimaldi back in the game. He brings passion, knowledge, and skill to the pizza culture, and God knows we need as much of that as possible. But to really be back in the game, serving *his* pizza—which is just about as good as this style of pizza gets—he needs to be in-house every day. Otherwise, he'll have kicked his nemesis's butt without achieving his grander goal of cementing his legacy among the world's truly great pizza makers.

I will go back when he's there (maybe there should be a Patsy Cam so we know when that is) because I know how much he cares about pizza. Because at one time, there was no better pizza maker or pizza inspector than Patsy Grimaldi. I long and live to taste that pizza, *his pizza*, because it was as good as New York-Neapolitan pizza gets.