

Crust

Beyond pepperoni

by Jane Slaughter

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(MT photo: Rob Widdis)

Crust

2595 Rochester Rd.

Rochester Hills, MI

248-844-8899

Wheelchair accessible.

Hours Call for hours.

Description

The flavors at Crust are a revelation — not to mention the wines chosen to go along with them. Lots of people pick up a pizza after work, and maybe a six-pack. For not a lot more money, you can have more fun at Crust, where the “Naples classics” attest to the Neapolitan way of thinking, where crust is supreme

Classic pie from Crust in Rochester Hills

It was a concept waiting to happen: “Pizza + Wine.” That’s what the sign says, above the door, and doesn’t it seem obvious, now that the owners of Crust have brought it to life so expertly?

I’ve been known to remark that I don’t care if I never eat pizza again. There’s just too much of it in the world — everyone’s fallback food. But the flavors at Crust are a revelation — not to mention the wines chosen to go along with them. Lots of people pick up a pizza after work, and maybe a six-pack. For not a lot more money, you can have more fun at Crust.

Partners Curtis and Greg Nordeen and Jon Sherer label some of their pies “Naples classics” and explain on the menu that “to the Neapolitan way of thinking, crust is supreme.” A couple of years ago, the Italian government discussed a law that would specify exactly what a pizza had to be in order to earn the labels “Neapolitan” and “Guaranteed Traditional Speciality.” In eight articles and six sub-clauses, they laid it out: hand-kneading and hand-rolling, six hours of rising time, olive oil to be distributed with a circular motion, a wood-fired oven, crust no more than two centimeters high at the edge. And round.

I’ve been unable to determine whether these guidelines ever gained the force of Italian law. Crust follows many of them, but also offers fantastic pizzas that stray from the norms, since only tomatoes and specific cheeses are allowed on the originals.

One of the secrets is to use a 900-degree (gas-fired) oven that cooks the pies in 90 to 120 seconds. This produces a crust with some bite to it, but a soft interior.

I can’t go along with the idea, though, that crust, excellent as it is, is the main reason to eat pizza. Consider one of the white pizzas, the Spinach, Crust’s No. 3 seller. (The No. 1, Curtis Nordeen says sadly, is ... pepperoni.)

The spinach pizza includes pine nuts, roasted garlic and tangy fontinella. The nuts and the garlic cloves have a similar consistency but contrasting flavors — the nuttiness and sweetness of the pine nuts, the mellowed bite of the garlic — and the spinach itself comes through strongly, unlike many spinach dishes where the only sign of spinach is the color. The character is preserved by mixing the spinach with ricotta to add moisture; otherwise it evaporates in the oven.

That's the level of attention to detail displayed in all of Crust's dishes. The Crust Original Red is simply San Marzano tomatoes with some balsamic vinegar and sea salt, oven-roasted to concentrate the flavors. San Marzanos are less sweet than other plum tomatoes, and Crust adds no sugar. The Margherita and several others use fresh basil. The 'Shroom includes four fancy mushrooms that aren't overwhelmed by the tomato sauce. The Sausage + Peppers uses a strong fennel sausage, Molinari brand. I loved the Pancetta, chewy, salty, rich and smoky, with sweet caramelized onions.

Diners may of course build their own pies, with artichoke hearts, arugula, basil pesto, capers, Maytag blue cheese, anchovies, prosciutto and a host of other ingredients. Or shock the Neapolitans with Thai Pie: peanut-ginger sauce, Asian broccoli slaw and cilantro.

Although the pizzas are called "individual sized," there'll be plenty if you share, especially if you're having one of the sides — which are as excellent as, if not better than, the pizzas.

The exceptional white bean soup contains few white beans, but no matter — the potato chunks are infused with all the other flavors of the broth, including pancetta and tomatoes. A messy, gooey chicken sandwich is rich with basil pesto aioli. The mixed greens salad with a tart mustard-honey dressing includes bacon, with which you can't go wrong.

These options make the \$7 combo — pick two from salad, sandwich, soup — an excellent choice. Two pastas, sausage lasagna and linguini with shrimp, are also on the menu.

The Nordeens have come up with a perfect dessert alternative. So many of us are trained (or spoiled) to want something sweet to finish off with, though we're really too full. It's easy to make room for a \$1.95-size serving of Key lime pie, white chocolate mousse, Boston cream pie or fresh berries with crème Anglaise.

You can use a similar strategy for your wine. The list, which will change every six weeks or so, is categorized with such helpful descriptions as "refreshing fruit, crisp," "rich, buttery" and "blended earth and spice." You can order a three-glass flight of two-ounce tastes, and the computer will automatically charge you one-third the normal cost for a full glass — no markup.

I had a \$5.50 Bandon Pinot Noir from Oregon ("sexy and smoky") that was indeed smoky as well as light. Each of the 35 choices, more Californian than Italian, is available by the glass or by the bottle.

My one criticism of Crust is the noise level, which is high. Yes, it sounds convivial and bustling, but it's not as relaxing as it could be.

Crust is open 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday and noon-10 p.m. Sunday. Good news for west siders: another store is planned at the end of summer in the Bloomfield Plaza at Maple and Telegraph.

Jane Slaughter dines for Metro Times. Send comments to letters@metrotimes.com