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That's Amore!

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A Pizza with Purpose

Farina Pizza brings The Bay another magic vision of Italy

by Alastair Bland photos by Vladas Girininkas, Studio Grazina



A restaurant named Farina was born in San Francisco in June of 2007. The venue, known for its upscale dining room and rustic, authentic cuisine of northern Italy, was conceived after two business partners from Genoa, unimpressed by American interpretations of Italian cooking, decided to launch their own restaurant to honor, celebrate, and serve the food that seemed otherwise unavailable beyond the borders of their home country. Success and acclaim came quickly, thanks to Farina's seamless transfer of traditional Ligurian food across half the world to 3560 18th Street, where Chef Paolo Laboa, a native of Genoa, unveiled his own family recipes and so dazzled the city's fine dining community with the real flavors of Liguria.

Five years later, the founders of Farina—culinary perfectionists Luca Minna and Laura Garrone—have introduced a second restaurant project to San Francisco. Located just a block east, at the corner of 18th and Valencia streets, the restaurant opened in early June and is rooted in the same spirit as the pair's original venture—but Farina Pizza and Cucina Italiana takes diners on a different culinary trip, to a different region of Italy. Precisely, the new «cucina» is an ode to the food of Naples, the southern port city of Campania—similar to Genoa for many aspects but steeped in Baroque history and sweeping romantic guitar tunes—and the warm, honest smells of the world's best pizza. Whereas the first

Farina showcased the award-winning pesto of Chef Laboa, the new rendition of Farina focuses heavily on the chief components of Neapolitan pizzas and other Italian fine staples: tomatoes, *fiore di latte* and *buffalo* mozzarella.

Chef Laboa has even moved from his old post to the new kitchen down the street, to take the lead in making his specialty Gragnano pastas, oven baked *farinata*, and a variety of new dishes and sauces all cooked with love and passion—but the restaurant's new captains of cuisine are also the father-son team Antonio and Gennaro Langella, formerly two of the most acclaimed pizza makers of Naples and now, happily, residents of San Francisco.

In perfectly recreating Neapolitan pizza in San Francisco, Antonio Langella has proven himself as meticulous and stubborn as Chef Laboa was when he spent six months in 2007 securing the right ingredients to make the world-crowned Genovese pesto exactly as he knew it from home. To begin, Langella installed an authentic Neapolitan pizza oven in his new workplace. The oven is an egg-shaped dome about eight feet high and made of stone—a super-heated igloo set upon a bed of compacted Mount Vesuvius sand and Mediterranean sea salt—custom built by his own experienced hands. The thin-crust and billowy pies go into the oven's outward-facing

maw on an Italian wooden paddle, and the intense heat within cooks the pizzas as fast as a Roman on the run can down an espresso; in just 45 seconds, the paddle is inserted back into the oven, and with a deft swing across the wood-topped and marble counters, it is transferred to a server for relay to the table, where it arrives steaming and moist, the outer crust a golden brown and the Italian mozzarella on top gooey and molten.

Open from 7am to 2am, Farina begins each day as a café, with freshly-made fine pastries, stylish chocolates, and an endlessly hissing espresso machine. At 11am, pizza time begins and does not stop until closing. Among the variety of pizzas offered by the Langellas is the Montanara, a traditional old fashion pizza, smaller than regular ones but loaded with its savory flavors due to a quick dunk in a quarter-inch of hot olive oil, before being dressed and finished in the hot stone oven. A new majestic creation presented for the first time to the American diners.

Elsewhere on the menu, cured meats, healthy soups, colorful salads, specialty pastas, farinata and breads, grilled fish and meats constitute the bulk of the appealing non-pizza offerings. These items will evolve with the seasons—a driving force behind the original Farina, as well—while the pizzas and their basic makeup will remain the same the year round. That’s because Neapolitan pizza relies not only on fresh tomatoes but also on special canned ones—specifically, a brand of preserved cherry and San Marzano tomatoes called La Fiammante and an essential ingredient in the best pizza kitchens of old Naples.

As diners approach Farina Pizza and Cucina Italiana along the sidewalk, they see first an outdoor sidewalk dining area facing the fast-paced bus-and-taxi gridlock of Valencia Street—evocative of the famously treacherous avenues of Naples and Rome—but they can also step into the *Bottega*, the tiny wooden take-out space created by Farina where to buy all its offerings on-the-go. The dining crowd is explorative, of refined tastes, yet casual. Inside, the 70-seat space is an intriguing blend of old tradition and new style—with rustic wood countertops and the stone pizza oven poised amidst modern tile, steel panels, and a slick nightclub pulse of music and colored drawings and lights.

After one orders, the pizza is ready in just minutes. It comes to the table hot and steamy, and the aroma it brings with it is apt to send a person on an instant olfactory flashback to their favorite pizza parlor in Italy. And with Farina’s Italian chefs behind the counter gabbing in the city slang of Naples, tossing and topping their pizzas precisely as they did at home, we understand that this pizza didn’t just come out of a wood-fired oven in the Mission District. No: Farina’s pizza has come from Italy. □



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