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# Motorino



Evan Sung for The New York Times

At Motorino in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

By SAM SIFTON  
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THERE was a television crew in Motorino in Williamsburg a couple of weeks ago, Michelle Park from NY1 shooting a segment with the restaurant's chef, the elegant young Mathieu Palombino. He smiled shyly in chef's whites.

### Multimedia



Motorino



The New Generation of Pizzerias



There have been others. Fame stalks the restaurant, which has locations in Brooklyn and the East Village. Vice magazine came to film an episode of its "Munchies" program, which streams on VBS.tv. Frank Castronovo and Frank Falcinelli, who run the Frankies restaurants and Prime Meats out of a compound in Carroll Gardens, were the ostensible subjects, but they ventured to Motorino to eat pizza. They ended up spicing Mr. Palombino back to their lair to make meatballs.

Even the upstate media personality Rachael Ray has gotten in on the Motorino act, publishing Ed Levine's and Adam Kuban's lunatic cross-country pizza competition, a bracket-style run-up to the announcement of America's best pizza, in the March issue of Every Day With Rachael Ray. (Motorino won in the eastern division; Pizzeria Bianco, in Phoenix, took the national title.) Ms. Ray is in

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Where the Pies Are

the East Village outpost of the restaurant “far too often,” she told The Daily News.

Motorino is having a moment. That seems fair. It serves the city’s best pizza.

It does so consistently, at both locations, whether Mr. Palombino is cooking or not. Made to his specifications and cooked in the tempering heat of a wood fire, **his crust emerges from the oven as a Neapolitan fantasy of crispness that is also pillowy and soft, sweet but not sugared, tangy** without too much salt.

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Multiple visits to the restaurants confirm: Motorino pies are great hot out of the oven, 5 minutes later, 10. You can order too much, watch a pie go cool on the plate, eat it anyway and discover: terrific.

You can order pizzas to take **out, drive them across the boroughs in freezing conditions, get home and reheat the pies: still terrific.** Even a slice in the morning, fridge-cooled mozzarella over tangy red sauce, exhibits the pliancy and flavor of bread, not cardboard.

Pizza has been a big deal in New York since the first slice was folded. It has been a big deal in the upper reaches of the New York restaurant world since at least 2004, when places like Franny’s in Prospect Heights and Una Pizza Napoletana in the East Village first fired up their ovens at the dawn of the artisanal pizza age.

There has been slippage since. Anthony Mangieri, the obsessive behind Una Pizza Napoletana, sold his space to Mr. Palombino last year and moved to San Francisco.

Fads fade. And rise again. Later this year Keith McNally will open a pizzeria on the Bowery, Pulino’s, with Nate Appleman, lately of A16 in San Francisco. The debut is likely to be attended by some fanfare. Mr. McNally is to restaurant publicity as [Emanuel Ax](#) is to his Steinway.

Motorino kept chugging along. And in the process, it became something more than an excellent pizzeria. It became a good restaurant.

Of the two locations, the one in the East Village, small and built by Mr. Mangieri, is the less hospitable, though this does nothing to the quality of the pies. It is a narrow East Village storefront, with hard angles everywhere and an atmosphere that runs ever so slightly in the direction of an [ice cream](#) parlor.

You can find a \$175 Amarone on its wine list, which has been curated by Fred Dexheimer, a former BLT sommelier. To order it would be to render oneself a cartoon. Motorino is a good restaurant. It’s not that good.

Better to take the L train the three stops into Brooklyn and enjoy the benefits of Kings County real estate: a large high-ceilinged room with warm incandescent lighting over wooden floors and soft-hued marble, the scent of the wood oven and the taste, against a cold Peroni, of transcendent pizza.

A restaurant is more than a pizzeria, of course. Mr. Palombino, Belgian-born and a product of some of the city’s best high-ticket restaurants (for a time he ran the kitchen at BLT Fish), appears to understand that well. A meal in his restaurants does more than result in simply a Homerish mmm-good sigh at the quality of the margherita pie.

(But, **wow, that margherita pie is good: perfect-pitch dough** with exactly the correct ratios of tomato to [cheese](#) to surface area to char to bubble and flat.)

Mr. Palombino has put thought into appetizers: a wonderfully bright and flavorful farro [salad](#), say; or a small plate of baby spinach and prosciutto spun together with



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stracciatella so that it becomes a new take on creamed spinach; or a plate of nutty, rich, fire-roasted mortadella that could serve as the explanation for the inclusion of fried bologna in the good-food hall of fame.

His beet salad has a little red onion for acidity, some boiled egg for base, a little white anchovy for salt and tang, and ricotta salata to keep everyone cool. The dish never loses focus. It is a paragon of beet salad. (But he isn't a god. His spicy roasted octopus and potato on East 12th Street tastes neither spicy nor roasted.)

The margherita is Motorino's baseline dish. Mr. Palombino provides two, one attached to an AOC designation as if it were a product of Naples. It features buffalo mozzarella along with [tomatoes](#) and basil. The regular uses plain old cow's milk cheese. Both are outstanding.

But a winter-special pie of brussels sprouts and smoked pancetta, dressed with mozzarella, garlic and pecorino, is like something from a magic act, a dog speaking [BBC](#) English. It is great and unsettling, far better than imagination would dictate.

A cremini mushroom and spicy sausage pie, with smoked scamorza cheese, garlic, thyme and pecorino, arrives at the table ever so slightly watery, a little off-putting. Within five minutes it heals itself, and thus rewards the wait before eating.

Choose white or red: a stracciatella pie, the cheese melted into the dough with patches of basil on top, with a drizzle of olive oil and a dusting of sea salt, grilled cheese for grown-ups; or a filetti one, with mozzarella, cherry tomatoes and a welcome bit of thyme that recalls the soft warmth of southern France.

For dessert, there are bombolini — essentially jelly doughnuts, and delicious. These are a curiosity, as eccentric, welcome and interesting as Mr. Palombino himself: a celebrity chef who cooks pizza, a talented restaurateur who meets his modest goals with grace and wit.

★

319 Graham Avenue (Devoe Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 599-8899; 349 East 12th Street (Second Avenue), East Village; (212) 777-2644; [motorinopizza.com](http://motorinopizza.com).

**ATMOSPHERE** In Brooklyn, a warm and inviting corner bar filled with young neighborhood types warming themselves in the wink of the oven; in the East Village, a smaller cafe-like setting with a similar crowd.

**SOUND LEVEL** There is a low and inoffensive hum in both locations.

**RECOMMENDED DISHES** Pizzas, beet [salad](#), green salad, roasted mortadella, bombolini.

**WINE LIST** A good selection of beers, and decent-to-excellent reds at the East Village location, at prices to match.

**PRICE RANGE** Antipasti, \$6 to \$12; pizzas, \$9 to \$17.

**HOURS** Sunday to Thursday, 11 a.m. to midnight, Friday and Saturday to 1 a.m.

**RESERVATIONS** In Brooklyn, reservations are taken for parties of six or more. Both locations offer takeout pies and limited delivery.

**CREDIT CARDS** All major cards.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** Both locations are on one level, and bathrooms are accessible.

**WHAT THE STARS MEAN** Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration.

Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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