

eat

Pizza that's amore

This cutting-edge pizza is a taste treat washed down with fine ales, writes **Bob Hart**



Pizza e Birra

60a FITZROY ST, ST KILDA
Ph: 9537 3465

Lunch Fri to Sun, dinner Tue to Sun.
Licensed. Expect to pay up to \$20 for a pizza, or \$60 a head plus drinks for three courses (including pizza).

THE Italian name of this stylish little place translates, you may not be too surprised to hear, as "pizza and beer".

Or, in more colloquial Aussie terms, as "all of the food groups".

Or, possibly, "everything you need in life except footy, a bird and a big plasma".

Because the fact is that Australians in general, and footy-loving Melburnians in particular, love their pizza.

And these days, mercifully, we are more inclined to love a really good pizza than one of the garbage pizzas that were once a staple.

There was a time, I hesitate to recall, when home-delivered garbage pizzas were eaten, from the box, either by kids swilling Coke or by adults who had swilled enough other stuff to have little idea of what they were ingesting.

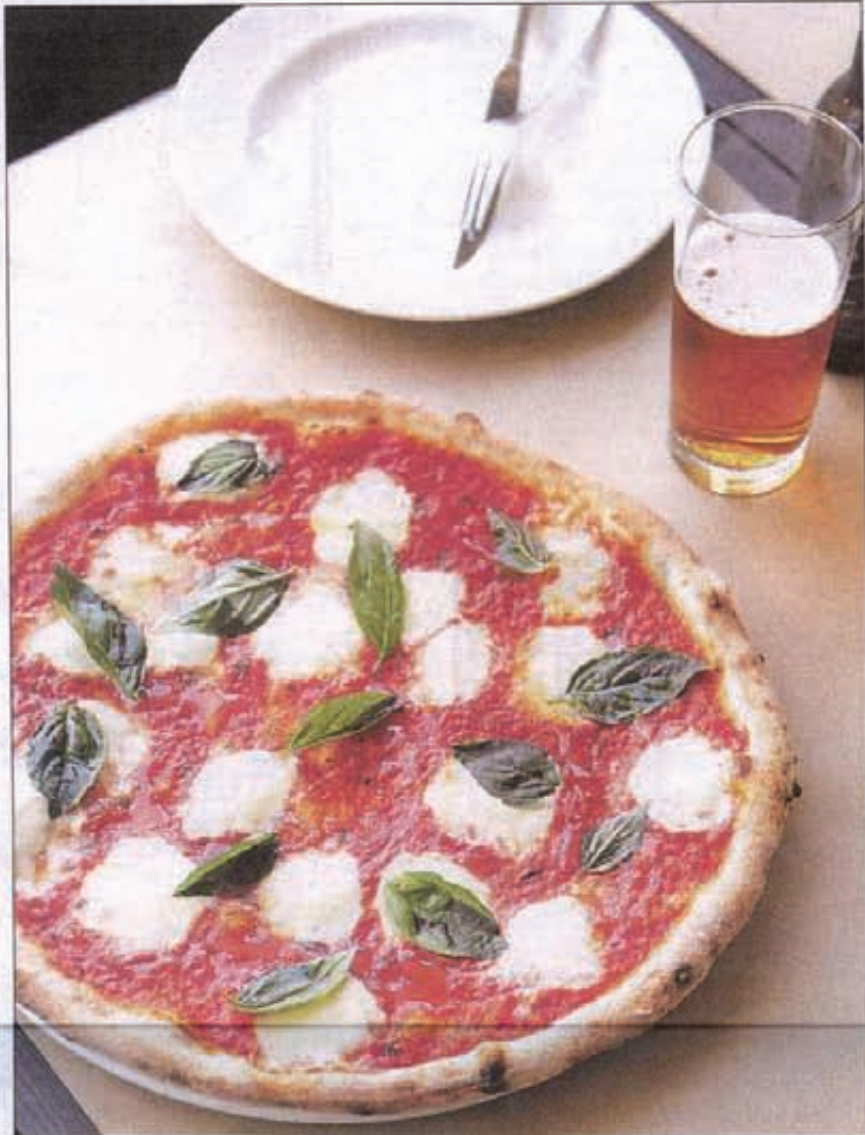
Or, tragically but therapeutically, these were eaten next morning, cold and congealed, from sad-looking boxes in the fridge. Yum.

There is, however, nothing sad or lonely about the cutting-edge pizza you will be served — a freshly made, wood-fired version of more than a dozen on offer — when you drop into Pizza e Birra in St Kilda.

Nor, for that matter, is there anything wrong with the beer — ideally the chewy, iced house brew, but any beer you select from the dozen listed — with which you should wash it down.

My mate and I proved this to our satisfaction last week when we dropped in on Mauro Marcucci, the larger-than-life operator of this place and one of our most accomplished Italian food operators.

Melburnians know him from Cafe e Cucina in Prahran, Il Bacaro in the CBD



try Most Melburnians know, by now, where to find real pizza. But just in case you've forgotten...

- ▶ **Ladro**, 224 Gertrude St, Fitzroy. Ph: 9415 7575
- ▶ **D.O.C.**, 295 Drummond St, Carlton. Ph: 9347 2998
- ▶ **Mr Wolf**, 9 Inkerman St, St Kilda. Ph: 9534 0255
- ▶ **Pizza Meine Liebe**, 231 High St, Northcote. Ph: 9482 7001

and Termini in the space now occupied by Pizza e Birra. But he also has a hot spot in Brisbane called Beccofino and a booming Pizza e Birra in Sydney.

We began with a bowl of warm Italian olives as good as any I have tasted, a shared pizza and a brace of iced Birra, the Woodend-brewed house offering.

We chose — not necessarily out of patriotic fervour and/or respect for the lovely Queen of Italy, Margherita of Savoy — a generous Margherita pizza in its red (tomato) white (buffalo mozzarella) and green (basil) livery.

The crust was thin, crisp, scorched and delectable, the fillings perfect. This pizza — crafted by Gianni, the house pizzaiolo — was a sensation.

We lingered over it long enough to

give our beers time to do their job before moving on to a couple of antipasti and a lusty sangiovese.

First, by way of testing the theory that everything tastes better crumbed, we tackled the crumbed buffalo mozzarella — a seductive way of presenting this fine Victorian cheese. Golden crunch without, silky cheesiness within. Drool.

Then, a representative jumble of grilled calamari bits on a glorious radicchio and witlof salad, the dish enlivened with a salsa verde. Great seafood, simply and deliciously presented.

Now the pasta here, we figured, stood every chance of being as authentically presented as the pizza: a shared portion of tagliatelle tossed with prosciutto,

What we drank

WHEN you find yourself in a place called Pizza e Birra, take the hint: start with pizza, and wash it down with a beer. Or three.

Here, look no further than the rich and delicious house ale — called, modestly, Birra, and made for the restaurant by the Holgate Brewery in Woodend.

This hand-crafted pale ale comes in at 4.5% alcohol, sells here at \$6 a stubbie, and was developed by restaurateur Mauro Marcucci with brewer Paul Holgate. And it was made — quite literally — to eat with pizza. So don't fight it.

With subsequent courses, you may find a rustic red to be more to your taste; I suggest you progress to the admirable '04 Monte Antico sangiovese from Toscana, Italy, at \$9 a glass, \$45 a bottle.



Grape and grain: '04 Monte Antico sangiovese and Birra.



broccolini, pine nuts and all the appropriate trimmings confirmed this.

Equally memorable was the salad with which we tamed it — a warm jumble of sugar-snap peas, beans, asparagus, baby spinach and soft goat's cheese with a lemon and pepper dressing. Earthy and seasonal.

AND finally, a stunning tiramisu (recipe below) — a pudding that is about as Italian as a pudding can be, but given a deliciously opulent twist here.

The traditional sponge fingers were used to form the base, but the eggy "custard" in which they were draped was enhanced with melted chocolate and Italian meringue. Don Giovanni could have extended his career with this stuff.

And there you have it — another day, another new and authentic pizza haunt in Melbourne.

"We had to get it right," Marcucci insists.

"We're Italian, we're proud and, apart from anything else, I could never eat a lousy pizza."

◀ **Great taste:** Salsa verde enlivened the delicious calamari on a radicchio and witlof salad.

◀ **Crust thrust:** (main picture) the Margherita pizza featured a scorched and delectable crust, plus perfect fillings.

◀ **Warm ride:** (above far left) the warm Italian olives were a fabulous starter.

Pictures: DEAN CAMBRAY



Tiramisu that takes the cake

recipe

TIRAMISU may or may not have restorative powers, as is often claimed. But if it does, Pizza e Birra's version would have even more of them. Try it for yourself (makes 6 serves):

- Roast and coarsely chop 100g raw, unpeeled almonds. Melt 200g couverture chocolate in double boiler. Separate 6 eggs and whisk 50g of caster sugar

into yolks until light and fluffy. Stir in 30ml amaretto. Set aside.

- Add 100g caster sugar to ¼ cup water. Heat to dissolve and to thicken without colouring. Whisk egg whites, working in warm sugar syrup. Take to stiff peaks. Fold 1 tbs of this meringue into yolk mixture, then 1 tbs mascarpone. Continue to fold in alternately until you have added all meringue and 500g mascarpone. Set aside.
- Add 70ml amaretto to 600ml

strong, black coffee and pour into shallow dish. Dip 12 Unibic (Australian) savoiardi sponge fingers into this until soaked, then gently squeeze out excess liquid.

- Press one soaked finger into bottom of each of six 10cm long by 8cm high oval dishes. Top each with 2 tbs mascarpone mix, repeat layers and smooth off surface. Top with layer of roasted almonds and a sprinkle of cocoa powder. Chill and serve.

