



Howie's Artisan Pizza

WHY ARTISAN PIZZA IS IMPORTANT

My mother went shopping for groceries most days. On some days she went to the supermarket, on others to the bakery, butcher shop or green grocer. There was a little shop on Fairfax that sold the hoop and farmer's cheeses she needed to make blintzes. Not far away was a little shop that sold dried fruits and nuts. It was just down the street from Leo the fish monger, where she bought herring and, on special occasions, a nice fresh carp to make gefilte fish. She bought cold cuts, sliced to her exacting specification, at the delicatessen. They came wrapped in butcher paper. My mom pinched, poked, sniffed, thumped and often tasted everything she put into her market basket. How else would you know what to buy? She knew the names of the vendors and they knew hers. Most of them lived in the community. How could you trust buying something as important as the food you feed your family to a stranger?

My mother made a hot breakfast every morning and packed our lunches for school. Dinner was ready when my dad got home from work. The refrigerator was always full of good things to eat; a roast chicken, mushroom barley soup, cooked noodles, kasha, carrots cooked with honey and a pinch of cinnamon. There was always fresh bread in the weird yellow plastic breadbox, a pink box of bakery cookies in the cupboard and salami hanging from the knob of a kitchen cabinet. She made her own dill pickles because you couldn't buy good ones in the market. Cooking for her family was a task my mother took quite seriously and making sure that her family was eating good, wholesome and healthy food was a top priority. She didn't need a nutritionist, a doctor, Oprah or a web site to tell her what was good for her family. Eating out was reserved for Sunday nights so that mom could have a well deserved day off. My mother was a good cook for sure, but not so much better than her friends or the women of her generation. This was not some idyllic small farming town we lived in; this was the west side of Los Angeles. We each have our own memories of the family table and the traditions that were born there, but I would offer that forty years ago my family's story was more the norm than the exception.

A lot has changed in two generations. Today, in the majority of American households, two incomes are required to maintain what would otherwise be a diminishing standard of living. When housewives began entering the workforce they had less and less time to devote to preparing meals and a greater need to rely on food prepared outside of the home. The food service industry was happy to fulfill their needs, and so the beast was born. What began as a cute, convenient and occasional alternative to a home cooked meal has grown into a monster of mind boggling proportions. The ubiquitous presence of fast food, convenience foods, junk food and chain restaurants has come to define how America eats. The impact this transition has had on our health is a well told tale of skyrocketing rates of obesity, heart disease and diabetes in both adults and children. No less important, but certainly less obvious is the toll that our reliance on industrialized food production has taken on our society, our family structure and our planet.

These are all big topics, of course. Suffice to say that over the course of just two generations, we have become alarmingly disconnected to the food we eat. We have allowed home cooked meals, prepared as they were in my mothers' kitchen with wholesome and fresh, locally produced foods, to be trumped by Big Macs, Pop Tarts and frozen pizza. Family run, neighborhood restaurants have been crowded out of the marketplace by the ferocious competition of national chains, leaving Olive Gardens, Red Lobsters and other preposterously bad restaurants uncontested in most trade areas. Small farms and ranches have been replaced by giant industrial producers, wreaking havoc on our planet. Artisan products, while experiencing a bit of a renaissance in recent years, are mostly filling a niche market comprised of high end restaurants and affluent consumers, rather than the broader market they serviced years ago. Local food vendors have been squeezed out of business by giant supermarkets. The family table is in danger of becoming irrelevant to our daily lives. Some precious things have been lost.

So, what's this have to do with Howie's Artisan Pizza? It's a simple notion really. If we want to feed our families natural, wholesome foods, then we need to support local farmers, ranchers and artisans. If we want restaurants that are run by people who care about the health and well being of their guests, then we need to support restaurants that are based locally. If we want the people from whom we buy our food to be part of our community, then we need to support local businesses and farmers markets. The consumer (that's you) needs to make these demands known by voting with their dining out dollars and the restaurant industry (that's me) needs to create new models of affordable, family-friendly restaurants that service these needs. Until better options exist, there is not much chance for change. Howie's Artisan Pizza may be a just a small step in the right direction, but every long march begins with small steps.

Chef Howard Bulka • www.howiesartisanpizza.com