

THE GRUMPY GOURMET

Top 10 'white' pizza locales offer more than mozzarella

By Doral Chenoweth
Dispatch Restaurant Reviewer

The white pizza has always been with us, just hidden under a layer of pepperoni slices. To define "white" pizza, start with the cheeses. Older Italians used provolone, mozzarella, Parmesan, fontina. The four-cheese pizza continues to be popular in Columbus.

The favored old Italian method of cooking pizzas atop blistering stone bases in wood-fired ovens was slow to be adopted in this country. Wolfgang Puck of Spago fame in Los Angeles gets most of the credit for publicizing wood-fired pizza ovens.

In Columbus, credit the previous ownership of Bexley's Monk for using a wood-burning oven as a dining-room centerpiece. At the popular Spagio, the first thing patrons notice upon entering is its fired-up wood burner for pizzas — the white, or so-called "gourmet" pies. Then there is Bravo Italian Kitchen on Hayden Road, with its pizza oven warming both atmosphere and appetite.

In alphabetical order, here are my Top 10 favorites for white pizzas:

■ **Bexley's Monk**, 2232 E. Main St., Bexley (Bexley Square), 239-6665. Pizzas account for about 20 percent of this restaurant's volume, possibly a credit to its innovation and willingness to create for the individual patron. For example, pesto pizza comes with mozzarella, artichoke hearts, black olives and sliced Roma tomatoes. The big seller is pizza Lucca, with wild mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes, scallions and roasted garlic. Scratch crusts come with crispy edges. If smoked salmon or grilled chicken is desired, just ask. Prices vary

with the toppings.

■ **B. Hampton's on Third**, 335 W. 3rd Ave., 299-6999. Although TV sets and pool tables create a questing atmosphere, pizzas appear to be the main attraction.

peppers, garlic and marinara \$7.95; also, the Margherita topped with basil and sliced mushrooms, \$8.95.

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■ SoloPizza:

This is the indoor incarnation of a noted street-cart operation, now in from the cold with a wood-fired oven and hand-packed Italian crusts. My favorite is a five-cheeser made with smoked gouda, Gorgonzola, Romano, mozzarella and Parmesan over a layer of pesto dusted with green scallions. The Verdura pizza comes with oven-roasted vegetables — zucchini, squash, onions, spinach, carrots and sliced Romas — atop a mixture of fresh Romano and Parmesan.

■ **Bravo Italian Kitch**

Rd., 791-1245. (This review is the second Bravo in Worthington.) The menu as designer Italian in a setting where locals congregate. There's a classic cheese, but go for a pizza with smoked chicken, mushrooms, caramelized onions, feta and oven-roasted tomatoes, \$8.85; next is the sweet Italian sausage, with mozzarella, roasted bell

pepperoni, 445 N. High St. (Short North), 228-8244. This is a bright new comer with a jazz atmosphere. The big attraction is a pizza with portobello and shiitake mushrooms, topped with fontina cheese, truffle oil and aged balsamic vinegar, \$8.50. The first runner-up is a vegetable topping with roasted zucchini, yellow squash, red and green bells, eggplant, red onion and garlic puree over mozzarella and goat cheese. A smoked salmon pizza is not on the menu but will be prepared upon request.

■ **SoloPizza**: 4030 Main St. (within Glocca Morra Wine Bar), Old Hilliard, 850-9166. This is the indoor incarnation of a noted street-cart operation, now in from the cold with a wood-fired oven and hand-packed Italian crusts. My favorite is a five-cheeser made with smoked gouda, Gorgonzola, Romano, mozzarella and Parmesan over a layer of pesto dusted with green scallions. The Verdura pizza comes with oven-roasted vegetables — zucchini, squash, onions, spinach, carrots and sliced Romas — atop a mixture of fresh Romano and Parmesan, \$6.50. For the record, there isn't a slice of pepperoni in the place.

■ **Strada World Cuisine**, 106 W. Vine St. (Short North), 228-8244. My favorite, the Ravenna, is not on the menu; it comes with caramelized onions to the rim and is topped with aging Stilton cheese, shaved prosciutto and shredded shiitake mushrooms. The big seller is the Forester, topped with portobello and shiitake mushrooms, baked with fontina and roasted garlic and drizzled with olive oil, \$7.95. The BLT pizza is made with bacon, tomatoes and a mesclun mix, \$7.95.