

## Pizza Tour de Force

By BRAD BARTH 11.15.2010



"As American as apple pie" is a misnomer. The phrase should be "As American as pizza pie," because I guarantee you that on any given day far more Americans are eating the latter.

Whether you're a Neapolitan purist or a Sicilian worshipper, whether you eat the crust or toss it to the dogs whether you're partial to pepperoni or — gag — anchovies, in the end we're all pizza lovers. And if you're not, please leave the country immediately, your citizenship has just been revoked.

But of course not all pizza is created equal. (Having visited Los Angeles many times, I can promise you that.) Clearly, if you want to try the best, you need to go to New York, where the modern pizza pie was born. And if you want the best of the best, then you might want to experience Scott's Pizza Tours, a delicious and fascinating way to explore the cultural and culinary impact that bread + tomato + cheese has had on New York City and beyond.



*The cousin crew: Jason Sapia, Craig Sapia, Brad Barth, Ernie Siano, Steven Sapia*

Earlier this month, I took the epic four-and-half-hour bus tour, an inter-borough adventure-on-wheels that stops at four different landmark pizza joints every Sunday. (The itinerary changes weekly, so the \$55 tour is definitely repeatable.) And I wasn't alone. With me were my cousins Craig Sapia, Jason Sapia and Steven Sapia, and their cousin Ernie Siano — all four New Yorkers, all four of Italian lineage and all four big pizza fans (okay, who isn't?). It would take a lot to impress the five of us and our discerning pizza palates, but our tour guide Scott — as in Scott Wiener, founder and owner of Scott's Pizza Tours — was up to the challenge.



*Scott Wiener, detailing the history of Lombardi's, America's first pizzeria.*

Turns out Wiener isn't just a pizza expert, he's more like a piz-savant. If he's not out on the town sampling the latest in pizza purveyors, he's at home baking pizza, or in Italy testing their version, or in Greece learning to make traditional flatbread, from which pizza was derived. Wiener's genuine enthusiasm for all things pizza is palpable and contagious, making every tour seem like his first go-round, even if by now, he's become a veteran of the pizza circuit.

"I eat pizza just about every day," said Wiener, who described his ideal slice as "a delicate balance of sauce and cheese atop a tender crust with a brittle exterior." Wiener estimates that in an average week, he'll generally consume around 15 slices, but some weeks he's easily doubled that. "I ate over 1,500 slices in 2009 and visited over 400 pizzerias in the last year alone," said the pizza pro.

Wiener created the tour in 2008 at the urging of his friends, who were frequently coming to him for pizza recommendations. "We would pile into my Nissan Sentra and leave New Jersey for a day of trying four-to-five pizzerias in Brooklyn or the Bronx," recalled Wiener. But as more friends and family began to embark on these pizza missions, he needed a bigger vehicle, so he rented a party bus. "We spent the day driving around New York City eating pizza all over the place. It was amazing," said Wiener. Not long after, the concept of Scott's Pizza Tours was born.

For those who prefer to walk off the calories they ingest, Scott's also offers a \$33 walking tour of pizzerias in Greenwich Village and Little Italy, four days a week. According to Wiener, every stop on both the bus and walking tour is culturally or historically significant and, of course, features great pizza.

### Tasting a Slice of New York



Our first stop on the tour was Lombardi's on Spring St. in SoHo, which in 1905 became the first licensed pizzeria to open in not just New York, but the entire United States. Our tour group had the privilege of sneaking into the historic establishment before business hours and touring the kitchen with its distinct coal-burning brick oven, which infuses a subtle smoky flavor into the crust.

Serving up mouth-watering Margherita pizzas topped with fresh mozzarella and basil, Lombardi's was the unanimous favorite amongst the cousin crew, in no small part due to its simple, sweet tomato sauce. The one downside: only one slice per customer. After all, we needed to save room for the pizza to come. Our appetites whetted and our stomachs howling, we left hungry for more.

We hopped on the pizza bus — quick shout out to Ronnie the bus driver, who on a weekly basis must endure Scott's torturous collection of pizza-themed music — and headed uptown to 1st Avenue and 118<sup>th</sup> St. in East Harlem, home to the original Patsy's and its wildly popular thin-crust pies.



Open since 1933, Patsy's has become a Mecca for NYC pizza enthusiasts, and it's easy to see why: the crust is flaky, buttery and baked in a coal-fired oven; the sauce is satisfyingly sweet and the cheese is a high-quality brand of low-moisture mozzarella, nothing like the preservative-filled junk that pools up with chemically oils (which, don't get me wrong, I eat all the time!). The cousins' verdict: another primo slice. And I was left wondering how it's possible that I had never found my way to Patsy's before.

We next crossed the Robert Kennedy Bridge into Queens, where we sampled Rizzo's Fine Pizza, a popular hole-in-the-wall which opened on Steinway Street in Astoria back in 1959. Rizzo's is celebrated for its original thin-crust Sicilian slices, aka "squares," which until fairly recently were the only item on the menu.

Not to sound like a "square," but I must admit my cousins and I aren't the biggest Sicilian fans, so unfortunately this wasn't going to be our favorite spot. That said, some people on the tour absolutely loved the joint — pizza is highly subjective like that.

The cousin consensus here was that Rizzo's tangy sauce was a bit too heavy on the salt and oregano — although traditionally Sicilian slices are supposed to be on the zingy side. We did, however, appreciate the thin-crust concept — I got myself a nice corner piece — and the slice was topped with a flavorful fix of grated cheeses and mozzarella. Also, I've love to go back to try the Nutella dessert pizza, which sounds so positively decadent that I would never want to share it with my cousins.



Finally, our bus barreled its way into the Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn, where we entered the realm of Sam's Restaurant, est. 1930. You wouldn't know it from the large sign up front advertising steaks and chops, but this old-school eatery on Court St. is nothing short of pizza perfection.

Here the brick-oven slice is classic Neapolitan, but highly refined, with a sublime tomato sauce mixture and a tantalizing mozzarella cheese topping. The cousins concurred that Sam's was their second favorite stop of the day, and the perfect place to conclude the tour, as the entire group dined together at one giant table, like a big happy family.

Amazingly, after four slices, my stomach was still primed for more pizza, but, alas, our trip had come to an end. The bus returned us to Lombardi's, where I was frankly tempted to order up another delicious Margherita pie to appease my gluttonous gut. Oh well, at least my brain felt nourished, as I not only learned about the fine art of pizza-making, but also discovered a side of my own city that I had never previously thought to explore.

For more information on Scott's Pizza Tours, visit [www.scottspizatours.com](http://www.scottspizatours.com).