

BUSINESS

Brown Dog Pizza Puts Telluride on the Culinary Map

BY MARTINIQUE DAVIS

TELLURIDE – Sports jerseys and signed sports memorabilia adorn the walls at Brown Dog Pizza in Telluride. The sports-themed dining room belies the downtown establishment's constitution as "just" a sports bar; but as its Telluride regulars know, there's more to this place than just baseball, football, and beer.

On any given day all eyes may be trained on one of the eight flat-screen televisions bordering the expansive bar, but the hearts (and taste buds) of Brown Dog's clientele are usually focused elsewhere. Brown Dog co-owner Jeff "Smoke" Smokevitch's Detroit-style pizza has become a favorite on the Brown Dog menu since it made its first appearance there in June, and now it's been recognized as one of the best-tasting pizzas in the nation.

Smokevitch packed up his hand-made dough and other pizza-making ingredients in early September, toting them through airport security checkpoints in coolers and across the nation to the Orlando Pizza Show, held Sept. 8-10 in Florida. The event is one of four major pizza competitions and expos held internationally each year,

and draws pizza connoisseurs from around the nation who compete for industry eminence as well as a spot on the U.S. Pizza Team.

Smokevitch's Via Italia 313, so-named for its all-Italian ingredients loaded onto a square Detroit-style pizza (313 is the area code in Detroit), wowed judges in the American Pizza Championship competition, garnering him second place.

Smokevitch explains he started the competition a little uncertain: he didn't know if the yeast in his Telluride-made dough would hold up after the long journey (he did have a back-up batch of dough he made his first night in Florida, in his hotel room). He wasn't sure his recipe for this little-known style of pizza, which he perfected in Brown Dog's kitchen at Telluride's nearly 9,000 feet, could be replicated at sea level. Then, when his special, two-inch-high blue steel pizza pan got stuck in the conveyor-style oven, he worried the mishap would spell disaster for the pizza he had been perfecting for weeks back in Telluride. Yet with the precision of a surgeon, he was able to remove the pizza pan from the oven unscathed, and the outcome was pizza perfection: a light, airy, one-



SOME PIE – Jeff "Smoke" Smokevitch's Via Italia 313 Detroit-style pie won second place at the Orlando Pizza Show. (Courtesy photo)

and-a-half-inch-high crust, characteristic of Detroit-style pizza, smeared with a blend of whipped ricotta cheese, whole milk mozzarella and white cheddar cheese, piled with dry Italian salami, red

chile peppers from Italy, sweet picante peppers, arugula, fresh basil, extra virgin olive oil, and shaved Parmesano Reggiano, with the final, Detroit-style flourish of a rich red sauce daubed over the top.

"I was very confident [with the recipe], because I had been testing it with the employees here and everybody loved it," Smokevitch said of his second-place winning Via Italia 313.

Smokevitch had, in fact, been testing out his Detroit-style pizza recipe almost daily for the six months leading up to the competition, and had actually spent most of his time while at the restaurant over the past three weeks working in the pizza line, "getting ready" for the Orlando Pizza Show. The exacting preparation Smokevitch undertook prior to the competition is reminiscent of an athlete training for a big game; Smokevitch does, in fact, come from a committed athletic background,

having played for the National Championship-winning University of Michigan football team from 1995-2000 alongside such football greats as Tom Brady.

Following his team's trip to the Orange Bowl in 2000, Smokevitch came to Telluride for a visit, and never left. He worked in a ski shop for a few seasons, and then got a job working for Dan Lynch's Pacific Street Pizza. He eventually bought into the business with Lynch, and re-titled the business Brown Dog Pizza (named for his chocolate Labrador retriever) when the restaurant moved to its spot on main street.

Although Smokevitch has been in the pizza industry for the last eight years, it wasn't until less than two years ago that he found his calling as a prize-winning pizza maker. He attended Tony Gemignani's International School of Pizza, and then became Gemignani's assistant at subsequent sessions. Gemignani helped Smokevitch create his Detroit-style pizza recipe, which won sixth place at the International Pizza Expo competition in Las Vegas last March.

"He's like the number one guy in the industry," Smokevitch says of his pizza mentor Gemignani. "He's like the pizza mafia – whatever you need, you can just call this guy."

With help from his mentor as well as his dedicated commitment to pre-competition "training," Smokevitch took home the second-place plaque earlier this month: an achievement he says was good, but not quite good enough.

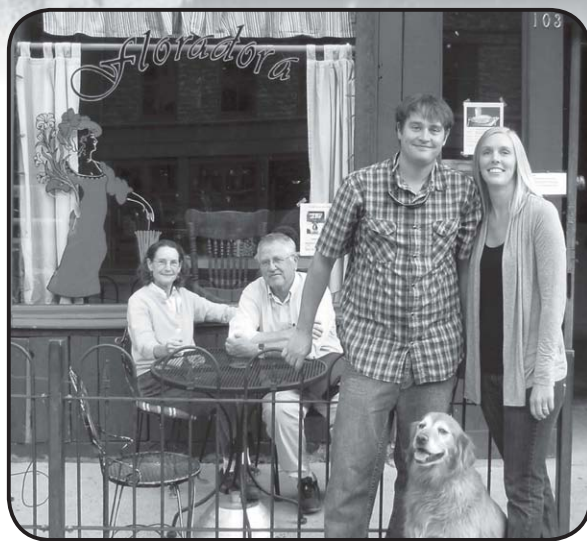
"I plan to just keep competing until I win," Smokevitch says of his plans for his up-and-coming career as one of the preeminent Detroit-style pizza makers in the country.

Brown Dog will feature Smokevitch's award-winning Via Italia 313 pizza on its winter menu. Pizza lovers will have their first opportunity to taste Smoke's creation this Monday at the Brown Dog's two-for-one pizza local's night.

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