

*The News & Arts Weekly of the Twin Cities • www.citypages.com • November 25, 1998 • FREE*

# CITY PAGES

## EATER'S DIGEST

# Pizza is like Mother's Milk

*By Dara Moskowitz*

**Punch Woodfire Pizza**

704 Cleveland Ave. S., St. Paul; 696-1066

Pizza is like mother's milk, except that you remember it. It enters into consciousness as the treat you get when your parents take a leave from monitoring your vegetable intake. It's a staple of grade-school lunchrooms. It's there at high-school parties. When we are drunk in college. When we are pinching pennies in Europe. When we are bored in trendy restaurants. But it's the best at Punch Woodfire Pizza, where the tender dough sizzles in a stone oven and absorbs the breath of smoke into its feathery heart.

Punch's is just a perfect crust, paper-crisp on the very cusp of the outside, springy and chewy inside, strong enough to support any sort of topping, yielding enough to inhale. Punch's tomato sauce is just what it should be, moderately apportioned but ripe and big-tasting, made with San Marzano tomatoes—long, thin,

sweet fruit from the region in the shadow of Mt. Vesuvius (near Naples) widely thought to be the best sauce tomatoes. Mozzarella at Punch is the fresh, sweet kind with the delicate texture you've probably seen in the form of small balls floating in whey or water in the deli case.

Pair this light crust, big sauce, and ethereal cheese with zesty toppings like prosciutto, spinach, capers, artichoke hearts, and several olives, including calamata, picholine, and saracene and you've got as much variation, and harmony, as you could wish for on a plate. Some pizzas I've tried, like the Vesuvio (\$9.50)—cayenne-spiced salami, pepperocini, calamata olives, cracked red pepper, and fresh basil—are fiercely heavenly, the spicy variety up top providing ideal counterpoint to the earthy crust below. Others, like the Quattro Formaggi (\$8.50)—fresh moz-

zarella, smoked mozzarella, fontina, and ricotta—show the sweet and delicate side of pizza. Punch pizzas all cost between \$5.50 and \$9.95, and I could eat there every night.

Punch's wine list is commendable too. 1995 was a very good year for Chianti, and Punch features two at modest prices, San Leonino Chianti Classico for \$18, and Selvapiana Chianti Rufina for \$17. Drinking a big, round chianti with my pizza, I was so happy I thought I was from Capri. (Punch's wines cost between \$15 and \$26; glasses start at \$3.75. The beer features a number of pizza-perfect red and amber choices, like Moretti Larossa, \$2.95.) My only complaints about Punch are that they are unforgivably not located on my block, and that they need to get bigger, fast: Crowds pile up on the weekends, and waits for tables often top an hour.