

Naples by the slice

Minneapolis' Punch Pizza is an ideal escape from the greasy boxes layering your floor.

By John Sand

Punch Neapolitan Pizza has been proclaimed as having Minneapolis' best pizza by everyone from picky critics to poverty-stricken college students. The restaurant boasts its membership in Vera Pizza Napoletana, an "organization dedicated to regulating the authenticity of Neapolitan pizza." Punch is one of a handful of members not located in Naples. It was recommended to me by classmates, a few perky workers at Banana Republic and even a chemistry professor my freshman year. My question was, what's it about this pizza that has everyone from Naples to Minneapolis giving it an approving nod?



A delicious, hand-tossed Italian pie peeled out of Punch's 800-degree brick oven. *Photo by Kelsey Siqveland*

A natural-born skeptic, I decided that this was one pizza joint that deserved a little of my Friday-night attention. It was my duty to take a break from my quintessential college diet of Ramen, Domino's and assorted caffeinated beverages to decide if this was a knockout show worth the ticket price.

For research purposes, six friends and I piled into a silver Bonneville to make the 25-block trek down Fourth Street Southeast.

We began at its southeast end, continued past McDonald's and through Dinkytown until we arrived at Punch's northeast location on East Hennepin.

The dimly lit restaurant was an excellent escape from the sub-zero temperature. Its warmth was aided by the choices of cozy paint colors and oversized artwork. Small lights hovered like pixies over the dark wood benches and tables. The dining area — a single common room — was bursting with energy from ten different conversations and the call of Italian orders from the kitchen.

Immediately upon entering the restaurant, we came face-to-face with the woman who would hand-make our pizzas. Behind her loomed Punch's famous wood-burning oven covered in an elaborate pattern of mosaic tile.

The pizzeria uses a genuine wood-burning oven to cook the pizza at 800 degrees for a sizzling 90 seconds. We happily greeted our food when our order was completed, and after the first bite of my plate-sized "Siciliana" pizza, I knew exactly how the restaurant chose its name.

The pizza was rich and flavorful, to say the least. Though they had just been in a sweltering 800 degree oven, the tomatoes, spinach, and artichokes tasted as though they had just been plucked from the garden.

Be warned, Domino's lovers; this is a far cry from Americanized fast food pizza. The intense taste of the ingredients can be a bit jarring for those in search of the familiar, and Punch's pizza proves a bit difficult to eat, so plan on putting your fork to work.

The restaurant's real asset, though, was its stand-out service. I made it fairly apparent that I had absolutely no clue how to order, and assistance was promptly on its way. From the cashier to the pizzoli hollering in Italian to the hostess in her black Punch soccer jersey, there was not a single misstep during the entire visit.

Though it may be a tad cheaper to call Pizza Hut for your favorite Hawaiian, Punch is worth a second look and a third visit. It's the perfect place to take your parents when they're visiting from rural Minnesota or your traitor friends that transferred to Wisconsin.

The bistro atmosphere, authentic thin crust pizza and outstanding service made the entire visit absolutely, as they say in Naples, "delizioso!"

PUNCH NEAPOLITAN PIZZA

LOCATIONS:

- 210 E. Hennepin Ave, Northeast Minneapolis
- Calhoun Village Shopping Center, Uptown Minneapolis
- 704 Cleveland Avenue South, St. Paul
- 1313 Wayzata Boulevard, Wayzata
- 353 Crystal View Rd, Eden Prairie

PRICE: \$8-\$15