



Newhouse: Pizza with an Egyptian touch

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If you're a pizza maker from Egypt, you know you'll be tested for authenticity. Thus, Farid Radwan is fortunate to have an Italian wife.

Radwan, who has Americanized himself as Fred rather than Farid, married the former Antoinette Ricucci, who was born in San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, and whose parents tested Fred's pizza one day while he looked on nervously.

"My dad loved it," she said. "At first, he complained that 'pizza should be simple, not all this stuff on it.' But he tried it, the sourdough and all the combinations, and he was hooked."

"He'd tell our customers that Italian pizza should be this way," said Fred.

Cairo, meet Rome.

Fred, 53, left Egypt for America when he was 19. He ate his first pizza, the most international of pies, when he was 10, 11 or 12. He's more specific about that initial pizza — a plain cheese pie made with sourdough.

"They make it in different ways, different textures," he said of his homeland. "With the new franchising and the new global idea distributed around the world by Pizza Hut, it became popular there."

Pizza Huts along the Nile — makes perfect sense.

Egypt's normal cuisine consists of chicken, meat, rice and vegetables. But Egyptians also love dough, the kind not dispensed from ATMs. Sourdough, mainly.

"Egyptians discovered the sourdough way back when," Fred noted. "It's very important."

And Red Boy Pizza — that's Fred's business — is "Home of the Sourdough Crust." Says so right on the front of Red Boy's menu. You can take the lad out of Egypt, but you can't take away his love of sourdough.

Fred's pizza education was furthered as a boy by his interest in all things Italy. His family sent him to the United States to get an education, and he earned a business administration degree from what is now Cal State East Bay.

Expected to return home and become an "entrepreneur," he fell in love instead with Antoinette, his Hayward campus sweetheart, and he remained here. They married and had three sons.

Fred owned an Oakland men's clothing store before he and family members purchased Bordenave's Bakery in San Rafael. One of their customers was Peter Forstner, who owned Red Boy Pizza and used Fred's sourdough as his crust.

When Forstner retired from the pizza business, he offered it to Fred, and that's how he acquired Red Boy. Fred owns two pizzerias in Oakland — 1500 Leimert Blvd. in the Oakmore district and 4100 Redwood Road in the Lincoln Square Shopping Center — and a third in Fairfax in Marin County.

At first, some customers asked Fred what an Egyptian knows about making pizza. He patiently went through "the whole spiel." He wasn't embarrassed in the slightest, but the inquiries since have diminished as patrons enjoy his thick pizzas. One reason: He's among the few pizzerias around that use a sourdough crust. It's his Egyptian heritage.

"Anyone can make sourdough, but it takes time to prepare it, and it must come from the mother dough, which started in Italy in 1942," he said of his special crust.

Fred and Antoinette's two oldest sons, Joseph, 23, and James, 22, are now in the pizza trade. Joseph is managing the three Red Boys with assistance from James, whose contribution is mostly technological. Fred oversees them with a firm hand, but he's been grooming them since they were 10 or 11.

"I wanted to secure the future of my children," said Fred, who also has an 11-year-old son, Daniel, who's being groomed too.

Like any good pizzamaker, Fred has a "secret recipe" he won't disclose. He'll say only that Red Boy uses organic and locally grown products. So what do Red Boy customers love most about his pizza?

"It's addictive," he said.

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