

# C CUISINE



LESLIE MCKELLAR

AT EVO, ARTISAN DOUGH GETS TOPPED WITH FRESH AND LOCAL INGREDIENTS LIKE ROASTED SPRING ONIONS, FETA CHEESE, AND ZUCCHINI WITH BLOSSOMS

## Upper Crust

EVO pounds out the best pie in town

BY JEFF ALLEN

### EVO Pizzeria

Pizza

Entrées \$5-\$10

North Charleston

1075 E. Montague Ave.

225-1796

Lunch and Dinner (Closed Sun.)

Good pizza isn't hard to find in Charleston. Any number of affable little shops about town dish out the good stuff, handmade, not too top-heavy or dripping with gimmicky stuffed crusts and horrid marinara. The champions are thin beauties with a beautiful crust, crispy but not prone to burn the roof off your mouth. EVO has great pizza, and I don't just say that because I used to rent an apartment to co-owner Matt Macintosh, or that I frequent the Slow Food Charleston events — an organization that he helped to found. EVO represents a new attitude in pizza altogether, one that returns to the ancient source of this seminal world dish.

It was high time that the fancy little wood-fired pies that have been all the rage in more formal restaurants — variously dripping with portabellas, goat cheese, real buffalo mozzarella, salt-packed anchovies, and all sorts of otherworldly accoutrements — finally found their way into a more traditional shop. You won't have a transcendental experience walking into EVO, but after a while, you'll definitely get the feeling that things ain't quite the same as they were at

that corner joint you used to frequent in college. You remember the place, where you'd down draft pitchers and scarf thick loaves of dough topped with a half-inch of gooey cheese and a river of orange-tinged grease. No, EVO is definitely not that kind of place.

The menu at EVO is seasonal. Normally that's nice, but with this Park Circle pioneer, which has a 12-inch white pizza flying out the door for \$9, it's a new day. In fact, the whole place is a breath of fresh air, primarily because it lacks the least bit of pretension. The guys at EVO built the thing out of materials that you could pick up at the local Home Depot; benches are handmade, plywood coats the ceiling with little strips of dark wood covering the seams. Matt and his partner Ricky Hacker are no carpenters, and the dark lines on the ceiling create a warbling rhythm, something like a backcountry Mondrian, but that's precisely the point. They are reinventing the "craft" pizza scene.

Order a "local Bibb lettuce salad," and you'll find it's as simple as it's written. Perfect lettuce, just touched with the first dews of spring, crisp and cold, wraps itself around a pristine wedge of local tomato, a few paper-thin slices of red radish, and a sharp house vinaigrette. It would be at home in any fine dining restaurant in downtown Charleston, but in Park Circle you can get it for \$6.75. Also good is the house-made focaccia, a bit airy for my sensibilities, but acceptable table bread served

with a spicy olive oil. A more dressed-up version comes as the "pesto fougasse" (\$6), a related flatbread inundated with basil and cheese and served with a homemade garlic mayonnaise, or aioli, that pairs beautifully with the bread.

The pizza leaves nothing to be desired, although a few quality anchovies in the house would warm my heart. Thin and just moderately crisp, it's the closest thing to a real Italian pie that I've ever eaten in the Holy City. It has that ethereal dough that requires a fork and knife, rather than fingers. It comes in 8-inch and 12-inch versions, and the classic "margherita" (\$7 or \$8.75 depending on size) combines house-made mozzarella, ricotta, and Parmigiano-Reggiano with an equally superb tomato sauce. Not overdone, never overly aggressive, it combines a few rich, quality ingredients with the elegance that raises it above others. The wood-fired oven provides a slight sheen of ash that coats the bottom of the pie, a trait of authenticity that may be off-putting to some, but that I particularly enjoy.

Pizza is one of those foods, like tacos or pasta, that morphs into whatever culture it finds. Like all flatbreads, it derives from early Neolithic hearth cakes — dough balls pounded between bare hands and plopped onto a hot stone beside a smoldering fire. EVO pizza is not far removed from the hearths of the earliest cooks, and in a world replete with overwrought, goopy pie, that's a good thing. ■