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Forno Rosso- The Red Oven

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By Jim Hale | **For the Capital City Weekly**

The bike ride from Rome's Garbatella quarter takes you under the remnants of a first-century aqueduct that once carried water to the nearby Baths of Caracalla, ancient Rome's second oldest public baths; the ride takes you past the ruins of the baths themselves, which, in the early morning dark, are lit up with an otherworldly appearance; the ride continues down avenues lined with cypresses and Italian pines that seem as ancient and monumental as the stony ruins themselves, until finally, about a kilometer from the Colosseum, you make a left to get to the offices of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

For six months this was Alexander Kotlarov's morning commute when he worked as a visiting scientist for the FAO. And it was during their stay in Rome that the Kotlarov family—Alexander and his wife Kym and their two kids, Nakenna and Zander — all fell in love with Italian culture, Italian people, Italian cars (Kym likes to race cars) and Italian food—especially Italian food—and best of all, real Neapolitan pizza.

When the Kotlarovs returned home to Southeast Alaska, they started making pizza at home every Friday night and found themselves continually talking about how to make it better, more authentic, more like the pizza they had in Italy. It became the family's chief topic of conversation, a family obsession: how to make real Neapolitan pizza here in Juneau.

It got to the point where they talked so much about pizza that they had to do something about it.

So they had a family meeting. They decided to open a mobile pizza kitchen here in Juneau serving real authentic Neapolitan pizza, pizza baked in an authentic Italian wood-fired oven and, as much as possible, using authentic ingredients. The family kicked into action. Zander wrote up a business plan, and Forno Rosso was conceived.

Forno Rosso—the Red Oven.

After looking at all the used and new options for a food truck, they decided to source and fabricate their own trailer with a complete commissary kitchen and the best wood-fired oven they could get. They sourced the trailer from Georgia and had it shipped to California for installation of the wood-fired oven built by Valoriani, a Florentine company specializing in wood-fired pizza ovens.

Then the family took a little road trip. They flew down to Utah, bought a new truck to pull the trailer, and then drove to California, where they picked up the trailer, and then up to Bellingham and caught the ferry back to Juneau.

After getting all the permits and setting up in their summer location next to the downtown library, Forno Rosso, Juneau's own mobile, wood-fired oven Neapolitan pizza joint, is finally open.

The Kotlarovs make their pizzas from carefully selected ingredients to get everything right—the flavor, the texture, the look. Their pizza is nothing like the homogenous American pizza you find everywhere. This is real Neapolitan street food. They use only the best organic products, local when at all possible, and have replicated a real taste of Italy.

Alexander says, “We are trying to stay as true to Neapolitan style pizza as we can. We have our flour shipped up from California — 00 flour (doppio zero in Italian—the finest ground durum wheat flour called for in authentic Italian pizza dough), and we make our own sauce from San Marzano tomatoes and fresh mozzarella. We get our pepperoni from Jerry's Meats, but we also have other meats that are made in Italy—like prosciutto, pancetta, and salami—and shipped up from California.

Kym has become the Master of the Wood Oven and notes that the real Neapolitan touch comes in the wood-fired oven that gives the pizza its true Neapolitan character. She adds that they do deviate, however, from some Neapolitan ways. “At Forno Rosso, we cook our pizza at about 750 degrees for four or five minutes, instead of the 900 degrees for 90 seconds of true Neapolitan style. And to suit American tastes, we've expanded our menu to include ingredients you might not find in Italy.”

(For instance, their king crab pizza is sensational.)

The whole Kotlarov brood has worked hard to make this dream a reality. Kym says that for her this is the biggest payoff from the business: “I wanted to give Nakenna and Zander the experience of working hard and facing a real challenge to achieve a dream.”

And on any given day at Forno Rosso, you find Nakenna or Zander — or both of them — hard at work. As Kym's co-chef, Nakenna brings to Forno Rosso an added touch of wild imagination; she has made friends with virtually all the kitchen implements and has given them all names like Tanaka and Elizabeth and Abraham and Hanna and Ciel and Sebastien.

A talented musician, Zander seems ready to take on the roll of charming urbane host and house musician. I expect any day now to see him strolling around Forno Rosso and serenading patrons with his latest musical composition.

Long hours, hard work, and great rewards—for the Kotlarovs and for Juneau. This is the real thing, mama. For more information, check out their website, <http://www.fornorossoalaska.com>. Or just stop by and get some wonderful pizza.

The other night just as I was falling asleep, I had a vision. I saw Kym and Alexander in old age as an adorable little Italian couple—Alexander had become a little old Italian guy with a moustache and more hair growing out of his ears than on the top of his head, and he was smoking a smelly Italian cigar and downing shots of espresso and talking with elaborate hand gestures. And Kym was little old Italian grandmother, and as she dished me up yet another mouth-watering pizza, she was imploring me, “mangia, mangia!”

I woke up laughing so hard that it woke my wife Michelle, and I told her all about my vision of our favorite pizza chefs, Kym and Alexander.

- Jim Hale can be contacted at jimhale821@gmail.com or through his website, jimhalewriting.com. The Alaska Press Club in awarded him the Suzan Nightingale Award for Best Columnist for his “On Writing” column.

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