

Is this the best pizzeria in Italy?

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It's far from grand, but Mike McDowall thinks this small restaurant in a quiet seaside town in Campania serves the best pizza in the country

For some time I'd been hearing rumours of a pizzeria where the cooking was akin to alchemy, where the chef harnessed all the forces of nature, where the pizzas were magical. Italian friends were unable, or unwilling, to tell me how to find this place. I'd collected a few clues, and I knew the region was Campania, but I'd yet to work out its exact location.

Then, quite by chance, as I planned a house hunting trip to the area, an estate agent recommended a little hotel "where they make the most delicious pizza". Had I stumbled across the location? A few phone calls all but confirmed my hunch. I immediately booked flights to Naples, rented a car, reserved a room and bought a map.

I suppose I was expecting somewhere grand - an old *palazzo* perhaps, a temple to Italian cuisine - but Pizzeria Anna, in the small town of Agropoli, is a place without pretension. The dining room is brightly lit, none of the chairs or tables match and there are three TVs showing football and game shows. I ordered the *pizza a sorpresa*, the surprise, which turned out to be divided into eight sections, each representing a different selection from the menu. It arrived like a painting, like a masterpiece you see, smell and eat. The base was light and crisp - not too crisp, but nowhere near soft or spongy. One section was a sample of the remarkable and rare *duchessa* - a ham and mashed potato pizza, which tasted much better than it sounds, and was not at all stodgy or bland.

Another section held perfectly cooked squid and huge, succulent prawns. Yet another was a triangle of



Topping ... Pizzeria Anna's unassuming face, and its extraordinary pizzas

salad, with rocket leaves, slivers of carrot and what I think were pumpkin flowers. Elsewhere there was creamy mozzarella, fragrant basil and a rich, sweet, almost fruity tomato sauce. I travel to Italy regularly and I eat plenty of pizza so believe me when I tell you that this was extraordinary.

Pizzeria Anna is run by Anna Scola. Her husband Domenico is the chef or *pizzaiolo*; her daughters Caterina



and Maria Carmela are the waitresses. Domenico's nickname is Baffo, meaning moustache, on account of his facial hair. The girls are known as the Baffo staff. Despite the laid-back dining experience, the cooking is handled with the utmost seriousness. There are certificates on the walls confirming that the tomatoes used in the sauce are indeed sweet San Marzano plum tomatoes grown on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, there are framed letters assuring customers that the mozzarella is most definitely from buffalo reared in the marsh meadows north of Naples. There are citations from numerous organisations: L'Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana and La Nazionale Italiana Pizzaioli. Baffo's business card reads "specialist in the research and development of the noble art of the pizza". Pizzeria Anna even has its own vineyard, producing the perfect wines to accompany the food. I cannot recommend it more highly.

Pizzeria Anna is right on Agropoli's seafront in the Cilento national park. The Cilento is a wild and rugged landscape, where wolves and wild boar roam among abandoned medieval villages and ancient Greek temples. The beaches are pristine white and the coastal waters are a vivid turquoise. But you won't find many tourists there because the area is not well served by international airports. So you can use Italy's great rail network, or do what I did - fly to Naples, pick up a hire car and head south along the coast. You can call in at Vesuvius, Pompeii, Sorrento, Positano, Amalfi and Paestum on the way to Agropoli - a great way to build up an appetite.

● Pizzeria Anna (+39 0974 823763, ristorantepizzeriaanna.it). B&B Anna (+39 0974 823763, bbanna.it) above the restaurant has doubles from €65-€100. Easyjet (easyjet.com), Thomson (flights.thomson.co.uk) and Thomas Cook (flythomascook.com) fly to Naples from various UK airports. Car hire from Naples airport with Atlas Choice (atlaschoice.com) from around £165 per week.



Where to go

