

Imma. Headstrong Neapolitan Pizzaiola in NY

Roberta Cutillo (January 24, 2020)



26-year-old pizzaiola Imma Liquori of Upper East Side restaurant San Matteo, brings her passion, creativity and much-needed female presence to the New York (and global) pizza scene. We spoke with her about growing up working the ovens in Naples and facing stereotypes and discrimination as one of the few women pizza-makers there, her move to New York, and her love for mixing things up in the kitchen.

Imma Liguri was born in Naples, in San Giovanni a Teduccio, “not a very nice neighborhood” as she calls it. Though she grew up in the kitchen, helping out at her father’s and her grandparents’ pizzerias since she was a child, landing a job as a woman in the Neapolitan pizza industry was not easy. “There were huge stereotypes against female pizza-makers,” she explains. “There were some out there but they were looked down upon, derided.”



At the age of 14, Imma started looking for additional jobs to help out her mother after she and her father split up. "I didn't want to take money from the family, I wanted to bring more in," she tells us. She worked in pizzerias across the city - wherever she was able to find employment through friends, only working for people she knew - for part of the day and then run back to help out at her grandparents' restaurant.

Eventually, she studied hospitality in school and continued working in Neapolitan pizzerias until, one day, a friend reached out to her on social media to tell her a new Italian restaurant would soon be opening in New York and the owner was looking for pizza-makers. "I was skeptical at first. I never dreamed of going abroad," Imma laughs.

The restaurateur in question was [Ciro Casella](#) and he was looking to open his second New York restaurant [San Matteo Pizza e Cucina](#) [2] in the Upper East Side. They met for a coffee in Salerno. "Every second someone came up to say hello. [Ciro](#) knew everyone!"

After a few back and forths, [Ciro](#) ended up offering her a job in New York and she took it. "He hired me without ever having seen me make pizza. He took a big leap of faith with me."

And so did she. Imma didn't know what to expect coming to New York. She was scared. Her mother, [Amalia](#), had recently passed away. "I needed a change and I wanted to do it for her, to prove that I could really make it," she explains holding back tears.

"I still don't know how I got on that plane," she says. But she did, and before she knew it, she was in the Big Apple. She arrived in 2014 and started working in the restaurant's first location, [San Matteo Pizza Espresso Bar](#), and then also at [San Matteo Pizza e Cucina](#), when it opened in 2016.

"[San Matteo](#) became like a second family to me," she recounts, "[Ciro](#) liked the way I worked." Having long-since mastered impeccable technique in making true Neapolitan pizza, Imma likes to improvise, to experiment with cuisine as well. She likes to say that you can make anything you want with pizza dough, even desserts.

"Sometimes, before my shift starts, I'll bake some dough and fill it with [Nutella](#) to make myself and [Marika](#) ([Ciro](#)'s daughter who also works at the restaurant, ed.) some breakfast. "She gets mad because I make her eat too much. I also make little pizza dough cones and stuffed them with ice cream."

Imma also loves to mix cuisines. "My aunt was from the Ukraine and I grew up eating her food, which was usually a fusion of Italian and Ukranian dishes. She transmitted the desire to create something new by bringing together different traditions. And [Fausto](#) who works here and is an incredible pizza maker, really, he's from Mexico and is constantly teaching me new things. I love learning about



different cultures through food.”

And every once in a while she gets the chance to indulge in a few improvised experiments in the restaurant: “Sometimes Ciro tells me to 'invent' something fun for a customer and I do.”

It’s not always easy to explain what she’s doing to American clients but she likes to try. “There was this one customer who always came in and ordered the same thing: a Margherita with sausage,” she remembers. “I went up to him once and managed to convince him to try all our specials. People like to see the chef come out of the kitchen and talk to them, they get excited and it also makes them feel safe.”

Despite her young age, - the headstrong pizzaiola is only 26 years-old - Imma has taken part in numerous international competitions. Are people still surprised to see a woman pizza maker, we ask.

Imma pauses before replying: “In the US, it feels like women can do any job and they don’t get judged for it. In Italy, at least in the South, you’ll find some women who drive trucks for example, but they’re often laughed at, insulted. Here, I don’t really get people who come up and say ‘oh wow, you’re a woman.’ If someone makes that kind of remark, chances are he’s Italian and from the South.”

She doesn’t let it get to her though. As she puts it, “what are they going to do, send the pizza back when they realize a woman made it?”

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[2] <https://www.sanmatteonyc.com/>