

No sloppy Giuseppe

How do you square the need to sell authentic pizza quickly and without charging the earth? Cafés could learn a lesson from one Neapolitan in London, who is on a mission to bring proper pizza to the UK, says Anita Pati

You don't want to mess with Giuseppe Mascoli's oven. The Neapolitan pizza owner prides himself on his €9,000 (£7,085), handcrafted specimen. "I had it made by an artisan in Naples," he says. "Then put on an industrial trolley and shipped over on a container. It's a very particular oven."

For the trained chef, who now co-owns London-based pizzeria Franco Manca, it's his oven's ability to reach 500°C that makes his organic Neapolitan pizzas so special. Blasting the pizzas for less than 90 seconds means they retain the moisture so essential in the pizza's soft crust. "So you have to know how to use it," he says.

Franco Manca opened in March as what Mascoli calls "an experiment". It's housed in London's vibrant and bustling indoor Brixton market, employing around six staff.

Among the yams, pigs' trotters and okra, his pizzeria has 54 covers across two shops. He commands a roaring trade in both eat-ins and take-aways despite being open only from noon to 5pm, Monday to Saturday.

Aficionados travel from far and wide for his 'cheap as chips' pizzas, which retail from £3.90 to £5.60. They also love the authenticity and focus on provenance that Mascoli is at pains to achieve. For instance, he trained cheese-makers especially at an organic, artisanal farm in Somerset to make its buffalo mozzarella.



Chef Marziano Melis at the Franco Manca restaurant

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The pizzeria's single-estate flour – strong, type 0 or 00 – is imported from a miller in Italy. Mascoli himself admits that they "take no short cuts".

So what, so far, is the secret to his £6,000 weekly turnover and 55% profit margin? "Lots of people buy the product," he says, pointing to sales of 150 a day in the five hours the pizzeria is open, rising to 250 on Saturdays. "I have an exclusive product, which took years and years of research, so I've got to sell a lot of pizza."

Confidence in his product must also help: "I have no competition in the UK," he says. "Everybody else is completely wrong, from A to Z, from the flour to the fermentation, the type of yeast that they use, the type of oven..."

Mascoli says even the good pizzerias can err, which is especially critical if it's with "the first fundamental" – the flour. "You cannot use industrial flours," he says. "You can get the consistency right, but you'll never get the flavour right."

Location, location

Mascoli acknowledges that his affable relationship with Brixton Market's owners is also vital to his success. He describes the owners as ambitious and says they want to introduce a diversity of food products to its offer. "I have a very good deal with the market people, who give me very low rent because they want to revitalise the market," he says. "After wages, the second largest cost is rent. And you cannot save on the wages."

"I need to have very, very high turnover," he adds. "I can do very well on a low rent, but I couldn't do the same in Chelsea, for example."

His wood-burning oven is also low on energy use, he says, which helps to keep costs down. "It consumes less and has very good heat retention," he says.

In the evening, he closes the oven doors and the flame dies. Yet in the morning, the oven is still slow-burning at 260°C, in which, once he