

"A Slice of Brooklyn""A Slice of Brooklyn"

By Dan Schlossberg

The signs of spring are everywhere: blooming flowers, talkative birds, and short showers accompanied by the unmistakable smell of fresh rain on budding lawns. Kids play ball in the park, lovers stroll in silent harmony, and enticing aromas from pizzerias with open doors permeates the air.

Pizza is near-perfect in many parts of New Jersey but especially tasty when combined with a healthy slice of local color.

Executives of The Travel Channel reached that decision earlier this year when they agreed to create a TV show called "A Slice of Brooklyn," named after an ongoing tour with the same name.

Like the tour, the show will be hosted by Tony Muia, a former health-care professional who parlayed his love for both pizza and his hometown into a thriving enterprise that presents slices of Brooklyn history along with slices of Brooklyn pizza.

Brooklyn means many things to many people: a stroll down the Coney Island boardwalk, a walk over the Brooklyn Bridge, a visit to a revitalized section of town called DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass).

One of The City's five boroughs, Brooklyn would be America's fourth-largest city if it hadn't been incorporated by New York in 1898. It has 71 square miles, 2.5 million people, and more miles of elevated train track than Manhattan. A crossroads of culture and cuisine, Brooklyn is also capable of consuming a surprising percentage of the three billion pizzas eaten by Americans annually.

Nobody knows that better than Tony Muia: his "Slice of Brooklyn" tour takes five hours, covers 50 miles, and gives participants a chance to jump the 90-minute lines at Grimaldi's, a historic pizzeria featuring coal-fired pies perfected in brick-lined ovens.

At Grimaldi's, the first stop, ovens heated to 1200 degrees burn 18 tons of coal per year and push out pizzas every two-and-a-half minutes. Ownership is serious about its product: a combination of anthracite, a clean-burning coal imported from Pennsylvania, and mineral-laden New York water, certified by a chemist, are essential ingredients. So are home-made mozzarella, hand-tossed dough, and tomato sauce produced from a closely-guarded secret recipe.

The same formula is used at all Grimaldi's locations: including one in Hoboken. Even the famed New York City water is included.

The original Brooklyn location is a local landmark, just steps from the East River between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges. Because it was the first Grimaldi's, the Brooklyn location is a legend to both residents and visitors. The only way to get around the lines is to join Muia's tour, which has time-reserved tables. It's tight quarters – for sitting, eating, or even venturing to the unisex restroom – but the taste of the pizza is well worth the squeeze.

But don't try to take pictures of the coal-fired oven – Grimaldi's staff is quick to quash would-be shutterbugs before they can snap a photo of the open kitchen in action.

Could the century-old Grimaldi's be worried about industrial spies? It has certainly hit upon a successful formula, serving a variety of Italian fare on wooden tables topped with traditional red-and-white checkered tablecloths.

Muia group's gets Margherita pizza, known for matching the red, white, and green colors of the Italian flag. It gained fame after Queen Margherita of Savoy applauded the dish when it was served to her during a visit to Naples in 1899 – 10 years after cheese was added to a round tomato-based dish called the Neopolitan pie. That was the first true version of today's pizza.

Spurred by sparkling taste-buds, word spread quickly. Lombardi's, the first American pizzeria, opened on Manhattan's Spring Street in 1905 and others – including Grimaldi's – soon followed.

L & B Spumoni Gardens, the second food stop on Muia's tour, was a relative latecomer. It started in 1938 after Italian immigrant Ludovico Barbatì made a small fortune selling hand-made spumoni and ices from a horse-drawn wagon in Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood. He purchased a building on 86th Street, later set up outdoor tables, and eventually added two more buildings. One of those, a pizzeria that opened in the '50s, began churning out thick Sicilian pies.

Muia's customers get two slices each, as they do at Grimaldi's, and often get samples of the restaurant's award-winning fried calamari appetizer too. If time permits, many purchase the spumoni that gave the restaurant its start.

Western culture is king on the "Slice of Brooklyn" tour. Muia not only shows his bus passengers movies filmed on-location in Brooklyn but times them to coincide with the exact moments the bus is on the actual site. They see the cobblestone streets of DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), where the blind Al Pacino drove a convertible in *Scent of a Woman*. They can imagine the harried Gene Hackman chasing a crook under the elevated tracks in *The French Connection*. And they can almost feel John Travolta's strut down 86th Street during the opening credits of *Saturday Night Fever*.

In Coney Island alone, the bus passes Keyspan Park, a minor-league ballpark with a statue honoring Brooklyn Dodgers stars Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese; the towering Cyclone, a 1927 vintage roller-coaster that thrills kids but scares adults; and the original Nathan's

s, opened in 1916 but still going strong. It is the home of a televised hot-dog eating contest every July 4.

Often overshadowed by Manhattan, Brooklyn has much to brag about. Its roster of famous natives ranges from Larry King to Sandy Koufax but also includes disc jockey "Cousin" Bruce Morrow, singer Barbra Streisand, and actor Gabe Kaplan of *Welcome Back, Kotter*.

Bugsy Siegel roamed the streets while earning \$200 a week as a Lucky Luciano hit man, Tiger Woods learned to play golf while his dad was stationed at Fort Hamilton, and Kenny Vance composed *Searching for an Echo* after singing street-corner harmony outside Erasmus High School.

Donald Trump's dad Fred was the largest real estate developer in Brooklyn before Donald seized the same title on the Manhattan side of the East River.

Even Elvis had a Brooklyn connection: his troop ship sailed to Germany from a local pier in 1958.

Tony Muia hails from Bensonhurst, the section of town where Vincent Gardenia of *Moonstruck* once enjoyed the honorary "Mayor of Bensonhurst" sobriquet.

Not far from the 1920 train station at Coney Island once deposited a million visitors per weekend is a pigeon supply store. Yes, some Brooklyn residents still rely on trained carrier pigeons.

Pigeons might have helped during the Battle of Brooklyn, which raged between Fort Hamilton and the tower of the Brooklyn Bridge during the Revolutionary War. Vintage cannons and cannonballs still remain in the park at the intersection of 191st Street and 4th Avenue.

More than 40 million cars per year enter Brooklyn over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, a 1964 engineering marvel that contains as much steel as the Empire State Building. Once the longest suspension bridge in the Western Hemisphere, the bridge stands as the gateway to the Atlantic Ocean and is a great vantage point above a bay crowded with tankers and other ocean-going vessels.

Rusting streetcars remain behind the Fairway Market at Red Hook, directly across from the Statue of Liberty and not far from Brooklyn's busy cruise ship terminal. Working trains – subway cars that surface on 152 miles of elevated tracks – give the borough even more personality.

Nowhere is that personality more obvious than on the pizza tour.

In addition to the pizza stops, the walk on the Coney Island boardwalk, and the chance to talk close-up photos of the Manhattan skyline between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, the tour peruses Bay Ridge, the largest ethnic Irish enclave in New York, and meanders along Shore Road, where home values stretch far into seven figures.

Just as the homes of Brooklyn vary widely, so does the pizza. There

are pies of every size, shape, and color and plenty of places to pursue the perfect slice.

As "A Slice of Brooklyn" shows, pizza has come a long way since the first pizzeria opened in Naples in 1830.

On Tony Muia's tour, there's never a dull moment and only a few quiet ones — when people are eating.

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