

A Quick Bite: Extreme Pizza

By Amy Pizarro

for the Mercury News

When it comes to pizza, I'm a stubborn traditionalist. Meat, cheese, sauce and crust make up my perfect pie, and I have been known to dismiss those topped with artichoke hearts or baby spinach as pizza for wimps.

But downtown San Jose's Extreme Pizza has given me an appreciation for pizzerias that, er, think outside the box.

Part of a San Francisco-based chain that began in 1994, this Extreme Pizza location opened in October at Santa Clara and First streets. Its menu will make your head spin with its inventive combinations, and there's enough variety to appease both hard-core meat-eaters and folks who appreciate lighter, healthier fare.

These are beautiful pies, emerging from the oven with golden, cornmeal-sprinkled crusts and perfectly blistered cheese. They are rich without being greasy, and no matter how many toppings you've chosen, the pizza is built proportionally so your slice is never overloaded.

You can create your own combo, but I recommend diving into the signature pizzas, with cute names like Mr. Pestato Head and the Drag It Thru the Garden. The specialty pies come in five sizes, starting with the eight-inch Indee — or individual — pizza (\$7.75) that's perfect for a quick lunch. If you're really on the go, the gigantic slice (from an 18-inch pizza and cut in two for easier handling) is a bargain starting at \$2.75.

One signature combo — the Pandora's Box — changed everything I think about veggie pizza. Scattered atop the pie were leaves of baby spinach, marinated artichoke hearts and sun-dried tomatoes, with a luxuriously creamy mozzarella-feta cheese topping. The feta is a nice balance to the tangy artichoke hearts, and fresh basil was a lovely touch. My pizza-purist heart was at first stunned that there was no tomato sauce, but I didn't miss it at all.

brought along another pizza lover, and we also enjoyed the appropriately named Everest, a mountain of meats with Italian sausage, pepperoni, salami and beef meatballs. The sausage was noticeably tangy, and the cheddar-mozzarella cheese mixture was just right.

Deciding to take the "extreme" to heart, I also sampled the pizza that sounded least appealing to me — the Poultry Geist, which features ranch-marinated chicken chunks along with broccoli, red onions, fresh sage, and Swiss, Gorgonzola and mozzarella cheese. Delicious! The broccoli was lightly charred and flavorful, and the ranch combined with all those cheeses for an exceptionally rich topping. (Though it didn't seem so much like pizza as like a really tasty chicken Alfredo dish with the bread built right in.)

There are lots of options besides pizza, including hot wings, calzones and subs. We sampled the Pizzawich (\$7.25), a toasted sandwich loaded with pepperoni, mushrooms, black olives and mozzarella cheese. The wide French roll was superb, though it grew a bit soggy with all that tomato sauce.

Next time I'll stick to a less-saucy option, like the Shredder With Cheddar (ham, cheese and tomato, \$7.25) or chicken pesto (chicken, sun-dried tomatoes and provolone, \$8.25).

My one beef with Extreme Pizza is that service can be spotty. One weekend afternoon when I was the only customer, the guy topping my pizza worked at a snail's pace because he was intently watching TV; the rest of my order sat around waiting for that pizza to come out of the oven. And then I realized nobody had gotten my sandwich order.

But with pizza this good — and the eclectic, endless toppings — I can forgive the occasional lapse.

Extreme Pizza