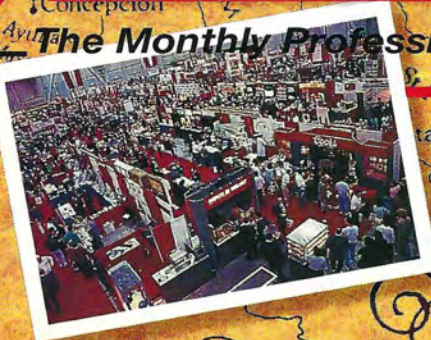


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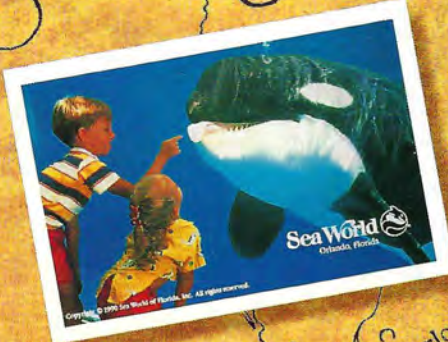


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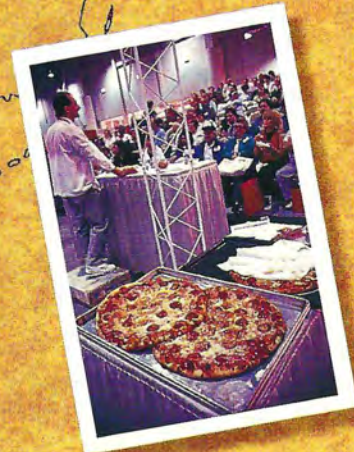


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OFF THE WALL at Andolini's

By Eric Minton

Michael Rabin is going on and on about how he grates his own cheese at Andolini's, his new pizzeria in downtown Charleston, S.C.

One time he ran out of cheese and tried to borrow some. "I couldn't because everybody uses grated cheese. I didn't want to use grated cheese. I had to go to Atlanta to buy a box of cheese.

"I'm not saying this is a fact, I don't know this is a fact," he says. "But it just makes sense, that you've got more flavor and it's a better tasting product when you grate your own cheese. We grate our own cheese every day."

Having expressed his conviction on this point, he says something totally off the wall: "We're great because we grate our own cheese. You like that one? That's our new advertising slogan. They say we're great because we grate our own cheese."

Off the wall is a relative term at Andolini's because on the wall is some strange stuff: a picture of Pope John XXI-II, a ceramic mother and child in gold paint, a small menorah, a brass clock with two cheap, crayon-color holograms of Jesus, a portrait of young John and Jackie Kennedy, and a photo of a mean-looking young man labeled "Employee of the Month." The guy looks so mean Michael has gotten complaints from customers.

On the front door a sign says "Buses welcome." Andolini's dining area is hardly larger than a bus. Michael says the sign is a joke, that they're ready for

anything. What happens if a bus drives up? "I'll close the doors. Actually, a bus did come up Saturday, but it was just the driver."

Back to the grated cheese. You point out that he buys chopped garlic instead of chopping his own. Double standard? "Right, and we also buy our sauce in cans instead of squishing our own toma-

toes. The Employee of the Month picture is also on the shirt, as is "Buses welcome."

Good humor and good pizza. That's the only thing you can say with certainty in portraying Michael Rabin, 33. I mean, this guy uses "beauty" and "aggravation" as interchangeable terms.

A native of New York, he talks with a



The front of Andolini's on 82 Wentworth Street.

atoes," he replies. "I don't think there's too many pizza places that squish their own tomatoes, even though that's our logo."

It is. The drawing on an Andolini's T-shirt depicts Michael stomping in a box

still-thick Queens accent—he "bolls" dough instead of balls it—swinging easily from earnest explanations of food preparation to self-deprecating humor. He describes a business philosophy that is grounded in simplicity and prudence,

(Continued from page 34)

then negates that notion when he describes his business practices. He lists his work resume and it leaves you wondering: is he a genius or a fluke? Is he a fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants entrepreneur or just flighty?

seat Andolini's, open 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday, was grossing about \$4,000 a week at \$6 a ticket, Michael estimates. This was before the College of Charleston, the 5,500-student campus just around the corner, opened

for fall classes.

The Charleston store is Michael's second Andolini's. The first in Exeter, N.H., he sold to Brian Reichlin, who still runs the 24-seat restaurant using Michael's recipes and preparation practices. When Michael opened that Andolini's in 1990, he was one of 11 pizza purveyors in a town with a population of 12,500. Andolini's quickly made an impact there, too. Wrote one reviewer: "They have a right to be cocky. Their pizza is extraordinary. . . On the basis of several single slices of plain cheese pizza only, I would say theirs is the only consistently excellent product."

Michael is proud of that comment—both the cocky part and the "consistently excellent." Consistent quality, though, is something he seems sincerely dedicated to, and it starts with the premise that simplicity sets a better standard. "It's a very simple place we have here," he says. "A very simple menu. Everything is very, very simple. I

believe in that a lot, of keeping the place real simple. I only have one size pizza, whereas most places have three sizes of pizza. They have three size drinks, we have one size drink."

He sells individual slices or 19-inch pies with a choice of 12 toppings for eat-



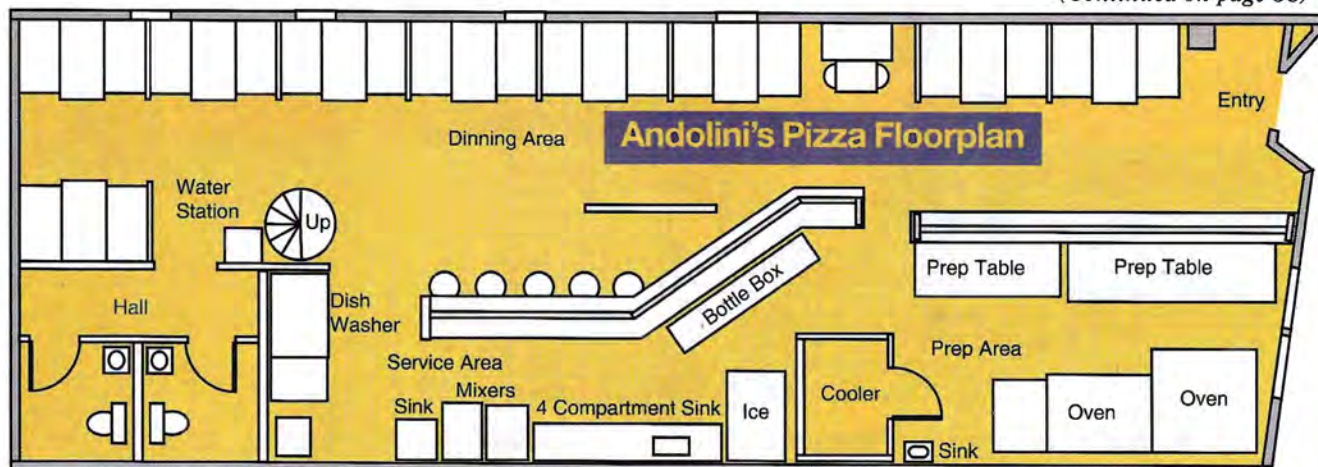
Michael Rabin specializes in New York style pizzas. He says others don't make pizzas like they do because it's too hard.

Well, he makes good pizza. When he opened Andolini's in May at 82 Wentworth Street, a block off historic King Street—Charleston's main shopping drag—he brought to the city the kind of pizza he grew up eating in New York. Charleston hadn't tasted anything quite like it, and in the first three months, 45-

Andolini's Pizza
 82-A Wentworth Street
 Charleston, SC 29401
Phone: (803) 722-PIES (7437)
Number of Stores: 1
Trading Area: Charleston, S.C.
Number of Employees: 7
Gross Annual Sales: \$200,000 projected
Profit Margin: Unknown
Food Costs: 30 percent
Labor Costs: 25 percent
Advertising Budget: None
Menu: 19-inch pizzas, pizza slices, Calzones, salads, ice cream
Beverages: Soft drinks, beer, wine
Seating Capacity: 45
Average Dinner Check: \$6.00
Owner: Michael Rabin

ing in or carry-out. He also does calzones with cheese, sausage or spinach, and an Italian-style salad the size of the Garden of Eden. For dessert there's Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream, by the pint or the half-pint, which is a pint tub sliced in two. Years ago when he was an ice cream wholesaler in Atlanta, he took advantage of a street festival outside his office by selling pints straight out of his freezer. "Some people said, 'A pint's too

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big. What if we only want a half pint.' I said, 'Oh yeah! You only want a half pint? Well, how about this?' and I took a knife and cut the carton in two." He tells this tale with an animation that makes you duck the slicing of the carton. "And I've been selling it that way ever since."

Limited variety at Andolini's doesn't restrict his customer base, he says. "We're not looking for people that want to eat here all the time. We're looking for people who eat pizza once or twice a week, and they prefer to eat it with us. So I want to make sure it's good every single time they come in."

To do that, Michael eschews simplicity in preparing his pizza. "See, a lot of places don't make pizza like we do. The reason they don't make pizza like we do is because it's too hard."

Slices, for instance, are individually prepared to the customer's taste.

"We allow the customers to build their own slice," he says. "By doing that, it's a real pain in the neck. It takes a long time for them to decide at the register,

Equipment

Oven: Blodgett

Mixer: Hobart

Refrigerator: Norlake
(walk-in cooler)

Freezer: MGR Equipment
Company

Pizza Tables: Bev-Air

Iced Tea Maker: S & D Coffee

Food Distributor

Cheese: Grande Cheese

Meat: Bari Distributing Company

Beverage: Coca-Cola products

Beer: Draft: Killian's Red, Bud,
Bud Light

Bottled: Bud, Miller Lite,
Heineken, Amstal, Miller, Sam
Adams, Fosters

Wine: William Wyncloff

and takes our guys a long time to decipher the ticket to figure out what to put on it." Once a new cashier shorthanded pepperoni as "pepper" on his tickets instead of "roni," and Andolini's most popular topping became, for a day, green



Michael and Edie plan to make Charleston their home for a long time.

pepper. "The whole place was messed up," Michael says. "Everybody had to get free slices that day."

Michael makes a starter pizza for slices with just cheese and sauce, then stores it in a wood rack. With the customer's order, the slices are topped—if time permits, the vegetable toppings are sauteed—and placed back in the oven for five minutes.

Michael makes his own dough on the premises. "No one makes the dough but me. I make every piece of dough in this place." He rolls it into balls, places the balls in air-tight trays and racks them in a walk-in cooler. "I let my dough sit at least a day, if not longer.

"It's just one of the other, I shouldn't say aggravations, but one of the other beauties of keeping quality pizza in the house."

For Andolini's sauce, Michael combines cans of filet tomatoes, crushed tomatoes, and extra heavy pizza sauce and mixes with chopped garlic, oregano and "a lot of basil."

He buys fresh produce daily. Behind the counter sit two old Hobart mixers, built when Hobart was still putting the motors on top. Michael uses those to slice onions, green peppers, mushrooms, and fresh sausage paper thin. Tomato slices are another topping, as are black and green olives, jalapenos, anchovies and garlic. And extra mozzarella cheese, which, of course, they grate themselves in the Hobart.

Each Andolini pie is made by hand

from start to finish. After stretching the dough by tossing it, cooks sprinkle a little corn meal on a wooden paddle, place the dough on the paddle, sauce and cheese the pie, and slide it off onto the stone floor of the Blodgett ovens.

"Exactly on the floor of the oven," Michael says. "Cooking it on the stone definitely makes the difference in pizza, I think. Because what you're doing is you're getting, like, a crispy bottom—not crispy but sometimes crispier than others—a little crunchy, crispy, but, see, I'm not crazy about that. I like to be able to bend the pizza without it cracking, but it still being tight and not doughy."

Michael shrugs. "Why say why?" "I grew up in New York, and that's the way I've always seen it done."

Uh-oh. You suddenly sense that the man all the while proclaiming elite wisdom in the ways of making pizza is more bluff than learned stuff. Where did he get the sauce?

"To be honest with you, the first day I made my sauce, I had no idea what I was doing. I mean, that's usually what happens. You play around, you think it's right, and leave it that way."

The dough? "When I first started making my dough, I played with it, and I didn't have time to change it, because I had to open the doors. I got a recipe, I opened my doors and was using it, and then I was too scared to try anything else."

The equipment? "We got them because I got a good deal on them. Every-

thing in here is used. I never have the money to buy new equipment, but at the same time when you open up it feels like you've been there for 10 years. That's what I like to do."

Older ovens are better anyway, he says. "They're all broken in already, help make better pizzas. I think. That may not be true, I don't know."

In this light we see Michael opening his first pizzeria in Portland, Maine, seven years ago. "I had never worked in a pizza place in my life," he says. He rented a place downtown next door to a bakery. "They made the dough for me, and I went into it like I knew what I was doing. I picked up the dough and started stretching it, put it down on the paddle, and I started making pizza. And I was in the pizza business." The place did well, he says, but contract problems drove him away.

It is confidence that makes this man.



Customers place orders at the register and receive silverware, drinks and a number.

Confidence in himself, yes, but more so in consumers. He knows, innately and through experience, what people want. And he gives it to them, no matter how absurd it may seem at first, like tubs of ice cream sliced in two or like building your own slices.

After high school, Michael attended hotel tech courses at Sullivan County Community College in the Catskills of New York. He later moved back to New York City and became a salesman on the docks of Hunt's Point Market in the Bronx.

With a brother and father in Atlanta, Michael moved there when he was 21 and went to work for the DeKalb Farmer's Market. He then started his own wholesale produce company in Atlanta, and later expanded to ice cream.

That led to his first restaurant, an ice cream parlor on Peachtree Street called Scoops, with a landmark 22-foot neon ice cream cone on the side wall. After two years he sold Scoops—which is still in business—to focus wholly on his wholesale businesses. But he soon sold those and went to Portland for a visit which turned into an extended stay and his first pizza place. When he left that, he left the United States for a run around Europe and Israel on a motorcycle before returning to Atlanta to work for Harry's Farmer's Market as the local produce buyer and chief product mover.

A year later, Michael was certified a genius. He took over a 280-square-foot box in downtown Atlanta, set up four tables outside and a walk-up window, called it Turkey King and served a menu comprising nothing but turkey: sandwiches, burgers, chili. It became a local hit and a national phenomenon.

Though successful, Michael left it after only a year. He sold out to a partner, moved to Exeter and opened Andolini's, a name he says he pulled out of thin air, but later realized it was the real name of Vito Corleone of the Godfather movies.

Despite his string of successes, Michael considers Andolini's his first real winner. "I've always had successful places, thank God, but I really never have done well with something, and that was one of the really good ones I've done." Nevertheless, wanderlust set in again. He wasn't happy in Exeter itself, and one of his workers, Brian Reichlin, wanted to buy An-

dolini's. After five months, Michael sold, and eventually wound up back in Atlanta working for a new farmer's market that lasted only a couple of months.

In October 1991, Michael visited a friend in Charleston, Edie Edelson, who now is manager of Andolini's, and on the second day of what was supposed to be a short visit, he bought equipment from a closed pizza place, put it in storage and started looking for a site to establish a new Andolini's.

He chose a 100-year-old building on Wentworth Street then undergoing renovations to house two apartments upstairs and commercial space on the ground floor, similar to the Exeter restaurant. The builder had planned to put his office on the ground floor, but a visit to Andolini's in Exeter changed his mind.

Customers give their orders at the register, the cashier gives them a number, silverware and drinks (serve-yourself iced tea and water dispensers are at the back of the dining area), then they take a seat. Servers bring the food to the table. It is casual, comfortable dining; "Kind of like a hang out," Michael says.

His used equipment and furniture, the stacked cases of beer under the counter, the tacky flea market purchases on the wall, and the gruffly effusive Michael, sweating in stained t-shirt and apron, greeting customers and barking orders to his cooks in Queens English, all in a 19th century house, gives Andolini's the feel of a Charleston institution. Reviewing Michael's resume, however, begs the question: Will it—or at least Michael—stay as long as it already feels?

"She won't let me sell it," he says of Edie. "We're going to stay here. That's what it looks like now. Because as long as we can keep good guys working here, keep good pizza makers here, and not have such a headache all the time, it's worth keeping this place."

Sounds like a firm conviction, sort of. But he later admits he doesn't know how long he'll stay. "I'm not sure, I'm never sure. I like to open places up. That's what I have fun doing. I enjoy putting them together. I don't like the everyday running of the business."

Remember, though, this guy won't let anybody else make the dough. ●