

Restaurateur Jim Niederhauser Opens Izza, a Traditional Neapolitan Pizzeria

by Bill Koelzer

Jim Niederhauser, 60, has been in the restaurant business all his life. Applying that lifetime of business success, he and his wife, Ann, opened their Izza Neapolitan Pizzeria on July 8, 2009, near the corner of Mira Costa



Izza has a beautiful wine bar.

and Camino de Estrella in North San Clemente.

Jim explains, "I needed to work full-time while I was attending college at the University of Denver, majoring in hotel and restaurant management. My jobs were mostly cooking or waiting on tables, not because I wanted to cook or wait tables, but because, with my wife and our baby, I needed a job. The best thing about those jobs was that they heightened my interest in restaurants and ultimately I chose it as a career."

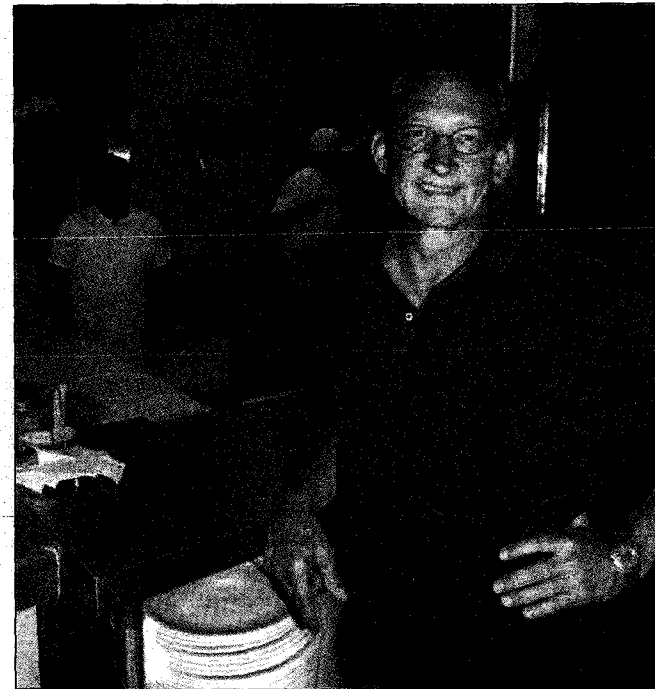
Jim's wife, Ann, has been fully involved in planning the pizzeria, as well. They met when she was 19. "She's a CPA, and has her own accounting business, doing our books and those of local firms," Jim revealed.

Right out of college Jim traveled widely for years. "I got jobs managing restaurants for large chains including Stouffers and Host Mar-

riott Services Corporations, plus Rusty Scupper. But I'd always wanted my own restaurant, and so in 2004 we entered into the partnership that became Gordon James Grill."

Jim believes in doing solid research before making a career move. "I was always looking for new opportunities, and several years ago a friend of mine said that there was a very successful restaurant concept in Washington D.C. called Two

Amys Pizza that I should visit. We visited it four times, and it was incredibly busy and successful. The pizzas were great, which heightened our interest in pizzas, especial-



Jim Niederhauser, owner of Izza Neapolitan Pizzeria.

ly those made with wood-burning ovens, as Two Amys uses.

"I also visited many other cities where pizzerias had wood-burning ovens and

they were all unique in their marketplace and best of all, they were busy. So after hundreds of hours of research Ann and I decided that's what we'd build."

The research became empirical: "I even built a wood-burning oven in my back yard," Jim admits, "so I could practice making pizzas. We did two years of research, eating pizzas four nights a week to practice, learn, practice and learn some more.

"Finally, Ann said, 'Hey, I'm getting tired of eating pizzas. So, what's for dinner?' I said, 'pizza.' She'd laugh and say, 'Not again!'

"However, we knew that our research was making progress. Hundreds of times we'd experiment - how much water, what's the best flour, how much salt... there's hundreds of pizza recipes. We were trying to perfect our own brand of wood-burning pizza."

Jim explains that a wood-burning oven cooks the pizzas with a thin crust, like they do in Naples, Italy (thus, Neapolitan, which means from/of Naples) Of all the thousands of pizza places in the United States, there are only a few dozen that use only wood in their ovens.

Jim explains why, "Wood-burning ovens cost more, are a lot of work, and require much skill. However, wood imparts a unique flavor, texture, appearance—the crust and toppings turn out dif-

putting more wood in. At these temperatures, we can prepare a pizza in two minutes, and then cook it in the oven at high temperature in five minutes. The pizza is placed inside the oven, using a pizza peel, right alongside the burning wood, and then the oven door is closed. Our large-looking wood-burning oven is considered a smaller one, but it still weighs 3,000 pounds."

Quality Ingredients make a big difference, too. Jim counts a few on his fingers: "We use the best flour you can buy, direct from Italy. It costs three times more than domestic flour. A 50 pound bag of domestic pizza flour costs around 20 dollars. However, the soft-grain, Caputo 00 pizza flour that we use costs three times as much. It is an Italian flour that is widely used throughout Italy and is considered to be one of the best - if not the best - 00 flour available anywhere. The results gained are markedly different from other flours - in terms of the nature, texture, color and flavor of the crusts made from the Caputo 00 flour."

Other ingredients are also top notch, "I'm using Italian San Marzano plum toma-



Pre-opening night: Judy Taylor, Chris Reenders, David Taylor, Dave Reenders, Tom and Monica Rempe, and Rachel Reenders sampled the wonderful food of Izza Pizzeria.

or stainless steel surface and cooked in a wood-burning oven at a temperature of 800 degrees F. We believe that we qualify, and hope that the D.O.C. officials agree when they visit."

Izza Pizzas range in price from \$9 to \$13, depending on the toppings. Their menu includes appetizers, salads, Panini's, pizza blanco, calzones, vegan mozzarella

pizzas, and Italian desserts. All menu items are dine-in or carry out.

With all of his past restaurant experience, what does Jim say is his main concern regarding the new pizzeria? "Customer satisfaction is what I most care about in managing this place." ☺

Izza Pizzeria can be contacted at (949) 248-4925 | izzapizzeria.com.



Never too many chefs in the kitchen... your pizza will be done to perfection! Chefs: Roberto Perea, Daniel Sanchez, Ramel Rios, Jose Rodriguez.

ferently and are tastier. This is partly because the oven temperature gets up to 800 degrees. It's also most esthetically appealing to see a crackling wood fire burning in the oven alongside your pizza that's also cooking there."

Jim says that a wood-burning oven is far more work because, "You can't just turn on the oven, like you can with gas. A wood-burning oven has to be started up two hours earlier to get it to the right temperature. You can't cook a pizza there at 300 degrees like with gas; it has to be up to 800 degrees. You start with kindling, and then gradually build the fire up. Then, once it's going, you have to keep it going by

toes since it makes a far better pizza sauce. We use fresh water, and sea salt, all natural bufala di mozzarella (made from buffalo milk instead of cow's milk) or fior di latte cheese, extra-virgin olive oil and fresh basil."

The pizzeria is soon likely to apply for Verace Pizza Napoletana status. Jim explains, "The Italian government recognizes Neapolitan pizza as an artisan traditional food worthy of preservation and granted it D.O.C. (Denominazione di Origin Controllata) status in 1998. Only a few dozen pizza restaurants in the U.S carry this prestigious designation. Neapolitan pizzas must be hand stretched on a marble