

An artist in residence at Giove's Pizza Kitchen

By Kirk Lang

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Joe DeVellis, a partner in Giove's Pizza Kitchen, may not be able to paint like Leonardo DaVinci or sculpt masterpieces from stone like Michelangelo, but when it comes to food, he is every bit an artist. Pizza pies are his preferred canvas and the endless choices of toppings and ingredients make up his palette of colors.

Pitting his talents against many more experienced competitors at the International Pizza Challenge in Las Vegas last month, DeVellis won second place in the world and first place in the United States for best traditional pizza. Not too shabby for a man who's never gone to school for the culinary arts.

"The guy that won first place was the champ from last year, is directly from Italy and is a teacher at the International School of Pizza," said DeVellis. The competition took place in conjunction with the International Pizza Expo at the Las Vegas Convention Center on March 10.

DeVellis, 32, said the honors validate what he always felt, that he and his partners make some of the best pizzas around. In addition to Giove's location in Fairfield, his brother, Sam, and his cousin, Idilio, also operate Giove's locations in Trumbull and Shelton, as well as Carl Anthony's in Milford.

What makes a great pizza is always up for debate, DeVellis points out, because everyone has their own preferences. That can make competing in a pizza contest rather tricky. Some people favor a pizza

whose crust is a little charred while others hate a anything close to a burnt taste. Some people like a thicker crust while others prefer a thinner foundation. While DeVellis says there is no right or wrong, he says winning people over ultimately comes down to the ingredients more than anything.

Giove's makes its dough and sauce on a daily basis and uses about five different herbs and spices.

"We don't over spice," said DeVellis, nothing that when you're serving so many people, it's best to keep it simple.

DeVellis' pie in Vegas wasn't a total departure from what is served at Giove's and Carl Anthony's. It was a Margherita-style pizza with fresh tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, secret herbs and blends, Kalamata olives and roasted peppers. It's not on the Giove's menu yet but it will be in the coming months. It will be offered at a reasonable price but "we may do one size only," said DeVellis.

Asked what it might have been that made DeVellis experience success in Vegas far beyond anything he experienced in three prior years out there, he responded, "I think it was a combination of things. A lot of people were doing different things. I kept mine simple. I tried to use the best spices I could get my hands on. I kept it simple not too over-reaching where you're able to taste everything in the pie. Not one ingredient was more powerful than the other. I kept the pizza true to traditional pizza."

DeVellis shipped ingredients from his Fairfield County establishments to Sin City. In addition to being judged on the actual taste of the pizza, DeVellis was quizzed by judges on what his thought process was and why he made it the way he did. One challenge in creating the pizza was the fact that competitors in his category traditional pizza could only use two toppings.

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"It was a tough decision," said DeVellis. "I was thinking, 'Should I use a meat? Should I not? Should I use a sausage?'" In the end, DeVellis went with Kalamata olives and roasted peppers. His gamble paid off against an experienced field and as such, he took home \$2,500.

"Every single person that I knew that I was competing against, they were either previous winners or top two or three finishers," said DeVellis, who added that those who do that well always get invited back. DeVellis definitely likes to keep things all in the family. In addition to running four establishments with a brother and a cousin, his wife, Dee, served as his assistant for the pizza competition in Vegas. Not every wife has a husband who can cook never mind cook as good as DeVellis, so, of course, "she loves when I cook for her [at home]," he said

DeVellis got his start in the food and restaurant business washing dishes and cooking at age 13. He has never regretted choosing a life in kitchens over an office job. Why is that?

"I love the whole idea of being able to create things and seeing people's reactions, and being able to get it out to a lot of different people," said DeVellis. He added he also loves working in a competitive and high-paced profession.

"My family and I were able to excel through hard work and determination," said DeVellis.

DeVellis doesn't just enter high profile competitions. He'll enter anything, large or small. This past Sunday, his Florentine pizza which is on the menu won best veggie pizza at the Shelton Jaycees annual event at the Pinerock Firehouse.

It isn't all about winning for DeVellis. The various competitions he enters, win or lose, help deepen his

artistic arsenal.

"I'm always learning," he said, noting that even after all of his years in the food and restaurant business, there's always something one can learn from competing and watching or talking to a fellow competitor.

No matter where DeVellis places in a competition, the experience makes him that much better "and my food's going to benefit."

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