

culture



The bar features a 10-by-16 mural, which is a reproduction of a 19th-century painting.



The bar at Varasano's Pizzeria leads directly into the main dining room with a view of the open kitchen.



Prior to opening his namesake pizzeria, chef Jeff Varasano hosted pie tastings at his home in Buckhead.

The Pie Piper

Culinary wunderkind Jeff Varasano opens his highly anticipated namesake pizzeria inside Mezzo.

After years of anticipation, chef Jeff Varasano has finally opened Varasano's Pizzeria in Buckhead. You may have heard about Varasano, whose pizza-making wizardry is often praised by food critics and has been spotlighted in publications like *The New York Times*. Born and raised in the Bronx, Varasano knows a thing or two about what constitutes good pizza—a dining staple in New York. And just like bagels, all pizzas, though theoretically uncomplicated to make, are not created equal, as Varasano, who spent 10 years globe-trotting from Naples, Italy, to San Francisco, in search of the perfect pie, would discover.

This quest for perfection may seem extreme to some, but then, Varasano is far from your run-of-the-mill pizza-maker. He studied at Yale, ventured into economics and set the U.S. record in 1981 for solving the Rubik's Cube in only 24.67 seconds. While working as a software developer, Varasano began his culinary experiments, preparing pies in his home kitchen. Not long after, he began hosting monthly tastings at his home and started a blog that attracted a cult following. Varasano's only request of invited guests was that they bring a libation of their choice to enjoy—the pie was on him.

I had heard the buzz about Buckhead's "scientist" pizza-maker, who had rigged his home oven to cook on the cleaning cycle (since that was the hottest possible temperature a consumer oven could achieve). One fortunate evening, I met Varasano at a party, and he proceeded to invite me to one of his coveted pie tastings. I quickly accepted. A couple of weeks later, I joined an eclectic group of people at his Buckhead home, many of whom were hard-core foodies. After a glass of wine and some socializing, Varasano went to work, first by kneading fresh dough made only from water, salt, flour and yeast. With his use of San Marzano tomatoes and fresh mozzarella, it was obvious that Varasano prized quality. And then it happened: The first pie appeared from the oven, its wafting aromas reminding me of an authentic Italian trattoria. My taste buds were set to explode, but Varasano still needed to gauge the pie for temperature before we could grab a slice. Needless to say, anticipation was at an all-time high, and when it was time, I took a bite.

The rest is, well, history.

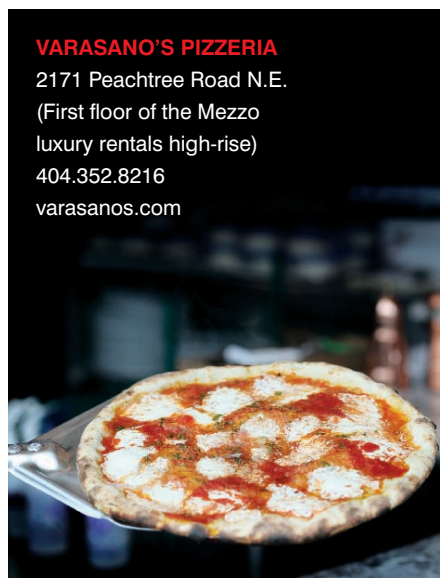
When Varasano announced that he planned to open his first namesake pizzeria in the Mezzo building on Peachtree Road in Buckhead—very close to home—you can only imagine my excitement. Construction on the restaurant began and, like other area residents, I anxiously awaited its opening. And I waited. Just as he

took the time necessary to develop the perfect pie, Varasano took time to build his dream pizzeria. His timeline? Perfection. He searched the globe for the perfect pizza oven before he finally found it—in Sweden. From décor to mural design, Varasano left no detail to chance. Month after month passed, and I wondered when the doors of the unfinished eatery would open. That fateful day finally came on March 25, and it was well worth the wait.

Pizza is the main attraction at this restaurant, hands down. Pizza purists might be drawn to the Margherita pizza, but my personal favorite is Nana's, with mozzarella, tomato sauce and a secret blend of Italian herbs. Or just go for the gusto and order the Chica Bella with ricotta, mozzarella, arugula and a pinch of lemon, and you'll no doubt be impressed. For a salad starter, I recommend the romaine salad with red peppers, red onions and house-made croutons. And for dessert, nothing beats the Italian liqueur cake with chocolate, vanilla and cannoli cream.

Varasano's opens for lunch at 11:30 a.m. and remains open until 11 p.m. on weekdays—later on Friday and Saturday evenings. A full bar will keep you occupied while you wait for a table during peak hours. Patrons are welcome to dine in the restaurant's large bar area, the main dining room or at the pizza bar, which provides a direct view into the kitchen.

Tasting is believing. —BETH WEITZMAN. PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA ANTHONY.



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Varasano doesn't need a flute to entice customers to try his pizza. One taste, and you'll be hooked.