

DINING OUT

A centuries-old tradition – Pizza Rustica Robust meat-filled pastry is served on Easter

Susan S. Yeske

To the uninitiated, pizza rustica sounds like a casual variation of pizza pie, sort of a homespun tart.

But as Italian-Americans know, it's a thick, double-crust savory quiche-like dish layered with meats, cheeses and centuries of tradition that is served on Easter Sunday.

Pizza rustica is just one of several Italian Easter traditions that the staff at Altomonte's Italian Deli is creating in large quantities this week to satisfy customers. This is a holiday that is bound to tradition, and food is almost as important as heading to church on the holiest day of the Christian calendar.

For those who want to bake their own pizza rustica, Altomonte's offers the necessary meats as well as freshly made ricotta and mozzarella cheeses. For those who don't have a family recipe, Altomonte's share theirs from "Nonna's Kitchen."

A robust pastry, pizza rustica calls for layers of prosciutto, salami, capicola and mozzarella. It's served in wedge-shaped slices during brunch or as an antipasto and often left out for people "to pick at" all day, says Vince

Grispino of Altomonte's.

"And make sure you have a glass or two of wine to go with it," he says with a smile.

Leftovers also are welcome, he said, as the pie is easy to rewarm.

Grispino's parents, Mike and Frances, emigrated from Altomonte, Italy and in 1971 opened their first store, Mike's Cold Cuts, in Philadelphia. In 1982 they bought land in Warminster and built the original Altomonte's, following that in 2006 with the opening of the store in Doylestown, which is tucked into a small strip center next to Poor Richard's on North Main Street.

The store appears small from outside, but is surprisingly expansive. So extensive is the store's selection that "I haven't been to a supermarket since I came to work here," said Dawn Guarino, an employee at the Doylestown store.

Easter Sunday is filled with food, says Grispino, beginning with an Italian frittata – an open-face omelet – for brunch, continuing with the pizza rustica, culminating with a roasted lamb entrée, and ending with sweet desserts. Those include ricotta, rice and wheat pies, which the Altomonte's staff also has been making this week.

Specialty breads include Easter bread with colored hardboiled eggs woven into the dough, and the dove-shaped Columba.

"Basically, you eat until you can't breathe," says Guarino, who bakes her own pizza rustica each Easter.

Instead of an Easter basket, Italian children receive a large hollow chocolate egg, wrapped in brightly colored foil, with a toy hidden inside. Altomonte's sells piles of the large eggs to their customers.

It's a day for friends as well as family, says Grispino. "People come in and out all day," which means food is always available.

All year long, Altomonte's offers traditional Italian specialty



products including dry pastas and olive oils as well as hot and cold prepared foods. Each day brings a fresh selection of dishes to fill the deli cases including meaty and meatless lasagnas, roasted peppers, seafood salad, eggplant-based dishes and meat or vegetarian meatballs.

The staff bakes fresh breads and rolls each day, and a large selection of Stromboli greets the customers as they enter the front door.

Regular specials include family dinners sized for up to six people each Monday, ranging from filet mignon tips in wild mushroom brandy sauce to chicken piccata. Prices are \$24.99-\$29.99 and each meal includes salad and other side dishes.

"Friday Feasts" serve 3-4 people and feature casual foods such as cheese steaks, hoagies, fries and wings for \$19.99-\$24.99.

April 30 will be Hoagie Day at Altomonte's, with large Italian hoagies selling for \$3. Orders must be in by 5 p.m. April 28.

For now, the staff's focus is on Easter dishes such as pizza rustica, which Guarino says she loves but makes only for the holiday.

"It almost doesn't taste the same if you make it in the summer and fall," she said.

The flavor of tradition always adds a little something extra.



Here is the Grispino family recipe:

PIZZA RUSTICA

- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ounces sliced prosciutto, coarsely chopped
- 6 ounces hot Italian sausage, casings removed
- 2 ounces sliced dry-cured capicola, coarsely chopped
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 2 ounces sliced sopressata, coarsely chopped
- 1 bunch fresh parsley, stemmed, coarsely chopped
- 4 large egg yolks, beaten
- 1 pound fresh-scooped whole milk ricotta
- pastry dough, your favorite recipe or store-bought
- 12 ounces mozzarella cheese, shredded
- 1 large egg, beaten
- 1/3 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Place lowest rack on bottom of oven.

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a heavy large frying pan over medium heat. Add the sausage

and sauté until golden brown, breaking the sausage into pieces, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer the mixture to a small bowl and set aside to cool. Into a large bowl, add egg yolks and beat lightly. Stir in the ricotta, mozzarella and 1/3 cup of Parmesan cheese. Add the sausage, prosciutto, sopressata, capicola and parsley to the mixture and stir to combine.

Roll out larger piece of dough. Transfer the dough to 9-inch spring form pan. Trim the dough overhang to 1 inch. Spoon the ricotta mixture into the dough-lined pan. Roll out the remaining piece of dough and cut into strips. Criss-cross the dough strips over the filling. Pinch the edges of the doughs together to seal, then crimp the dough edges decoratively. Brush the remaining beaten egg over the entire pastry top. Bake on the bottom shelf until the crust is golden brown, about 1 hour.

Let stand 15 minutes. Release the pan sides and transfer the pizza to a platter. Cut into wedges and serve.

susan.yeske@gmail.com

ALTOMONTE'S ITALIAN MARKET AND DELI

812 North Easton Road
(Route 611), Doylestown
(next to Poor Richard's)
(215) 489-8889, www.altomontes.com

Hours: Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m.-7 p.m., Sat. 9 a.m.-6 p.m., Sun. 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Easter specialties: Pizza rustica, wheat pie, ricotta pie, rice pie.

Signature dishes: Marinara, clam, meat, vodka, and other sauces.