



FIRST LOOK

## Cheese-Oozing Focaccia and Bursting Buzzetti Are NYC's Newest Pizza Hits

New York offers about every type of pizza imaginable, but Coco Pizzeria offers stellar versions we haven't seen before

by [Robert Sietsema](#) | Mar 22, 2021, 3:27pm EDT

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**D**espite the current availability of **20 or so distinct types of pizza** in the city, a new addition is always welcome. Such an event occurred recently with the opening of Coco Pizzeria on Spring Street just west of Soho. This place serves not only the requisite pizzas and sandwiches, but also intriguing, cheese-filled focaccia and a doughy item called buzzetti, which I've never encountered before. Indeed, the focaccia robiola, in particular, totally overshadows the pizzas that are the ostensible purpose of the place.

If the name *Coco Pizzeria* sounds familiar, the restaurant's predecessor was *Coco Pazza*, an Upper East Side celebrity magnet in the '90s. Founded by Pino Luongo, it eventually migrated downtown to Soho, where it never enjoyed quite the same popularity, but is still in business today.

But now Luongo, along with pizzaiolo *Ciro Verde*, has opened a dough-based restaurant a few blocks west. *Coco Pizzeria* occupies the old *Giorgione* space near the *Ear Inn*, in a riverside neighborhood known for its obscurity and quietude — though several high-rise condos are raucously under construction not far away. (It's also worth noting that nearly two decades ago, *Via Carota* partner *Jody Williams* made the wood-burning oven installed there famous with her thin-crust artisanal pizzas.)

Among the Neapolitan pizzas and hero sandwiches that fill out the menu, I immediately spotted a two-item section called *Our Focaccia*. The round focaccia *robiola* (\$20) had a thin crust that was bumpy, browned, perforated, and unleavened — unlike the usual pizza crust, which is made with either yeast-risen dough or sourdough. This lack of leavening rendered the focaccia engagingly crunchy. It had been split longitudinally while still warm and smeared with *robiola*, a soft cheese popular in the Piedmont region that may be made with any combination of cow, sheep, and goat milk. Once spread on the crust, it oozed out the side and from the holes on the top.



Soho West has a new pizzeria.



Coco Pizzeria's focaccia robiola

Eaten warm, the pie was heavenly. A few drops of truffle oil had been added, contributing a subtle and welcome taste to the creaminess of the cheese — though I'm usually suspicious of truffle oil, especially when used ham-fistedly, which is not the case here. I wolfed down the pie, or most of it, sitting on the former loading dock in front of the restaurant in the sunshine, and a week later returned to try the other focaccia (\$24), which was set up with the same cheese, to which arugula and thin slices of prosciutto had been added. Damn good, but not quite as good, reading more like a sandwich than a pizza.

Pizzeria's style of focaccia was almost new to me. I'd had a similar cheese-oozing flatbread at *Farina Focaccia & Cucina Italiana* in San Francisco's Mission District a decade earlier, and it had left a similar impression. In the interim, I'd become acquainted with the stuffed pizzas of Abruzzo, a region directly east of Rome across the Apennine Mountains. Those pizzas pressed potatoes, sausage, and cheese between two crusts — at least the version sold at *La Villa Pizzeria* in Park Slope did. I've seen it at other pizzerias around town, too, though research suggests focaccia are more common in that part of Italy than stuffed pizza.

But that was a leavened crust and this was not. And this pie, called a focaccia and not a pizza, was much thinner, flying in the face of the principle that focaccias are commonly defined by being thicker, doughier, and more sparsely topped than pizzas, and often cheeseless. I showed *Coco Pizzeria's* *robiola* pie to focaccia master *Rick Easton* of *Bread & Salt* in *Jersey City*. He immediately identified it as being in the style of focaccia *di Recco* — referring to a town near *Genoa*, in *Liguria* — “but with a different cheese,” he told me.



The cheese in the original version of focaccia di Recco would be stracchino, and the dish was rumored to have been **invented by townspeople** on the lam in the mountains from the invading Saracens during the Third Crusade in the 1100s. Stracchino, said to be made from the milk of tired cows, is slightly less loamy and funky than robiola, and less prone to clumpy melting. Indeed, it was that meltability, along with a fantastic, cracker-like crust, that made Coco Pizzeria's focaccia so appealing.



Easton's focaccia Barese

I went on to ask Easton the difference between pizza and focaccia, feeling like he must have a short answer that would clarify the issue for good. I was wrong on that point, because his response was scholarly and complex, but left lots of wiggle room. It's worth quoting in full:

The word *focaccia* comes from focus, I believe, which is the Latin word for hearth. It goes back to the practice of cooking flatbreads on the oven floor to take some of the heat out before baking bread. The French *fougasse* comes from the same root. What I make is considered focaccia Romana, but also pizza alla pala, depending on who you ask. To make matters more complicated, most focaccia as we recognize it today is cooked in a pan, not on the hearth, and pizzas generally [cooked] on the hearth and not in a pan, with notable exceptions. There is also a northern Italian fougasse, which is a highly enriched sweet bread; pizza dolce, another sweet bread; pizza rustica, a savory pie; pizza pasqualina, also savory; and pizza al formaggio, an enriched cheese pie. So, in short, the difference is largely in the usage of the word; someone smarter would need to explain it all.

It seems, in short, that the terms pizza and focaccia are at least partly interchangeable — with the caveat that focaccias are usually thicker, but not in the case of focaccia di Recco or Coco Pizzeria's focaccia robiola.



Bomba buzzetti from Coco Pizzeria

There's one further item on the menu that could use some explaining: the buzzy-sounding buzzetti. The menu calls it an open-face mini calzone, which doesn't quite convey the concept — wouldn't an open-face calzone be a pizza? The term appears to be a coinage, since I can find no reference to it in any book about Italian food.

It consists of pizza dough formed into what looks like a party popper, filled with a choice of four set combinations of ingredients. I picked bomba, which features stracchino, mortadella, and bomba Calabrese, a red-pepper paste that causes the buzzetti to explode with flavor. It's an utterly agreeable snack, but priced a little steeply at \$10 each. In a pair of visits, I tried a couple of pizzas, and found them predictable compared to the intriguing focaccias and buzzetti — the true surprises at Coco Pizzeria.