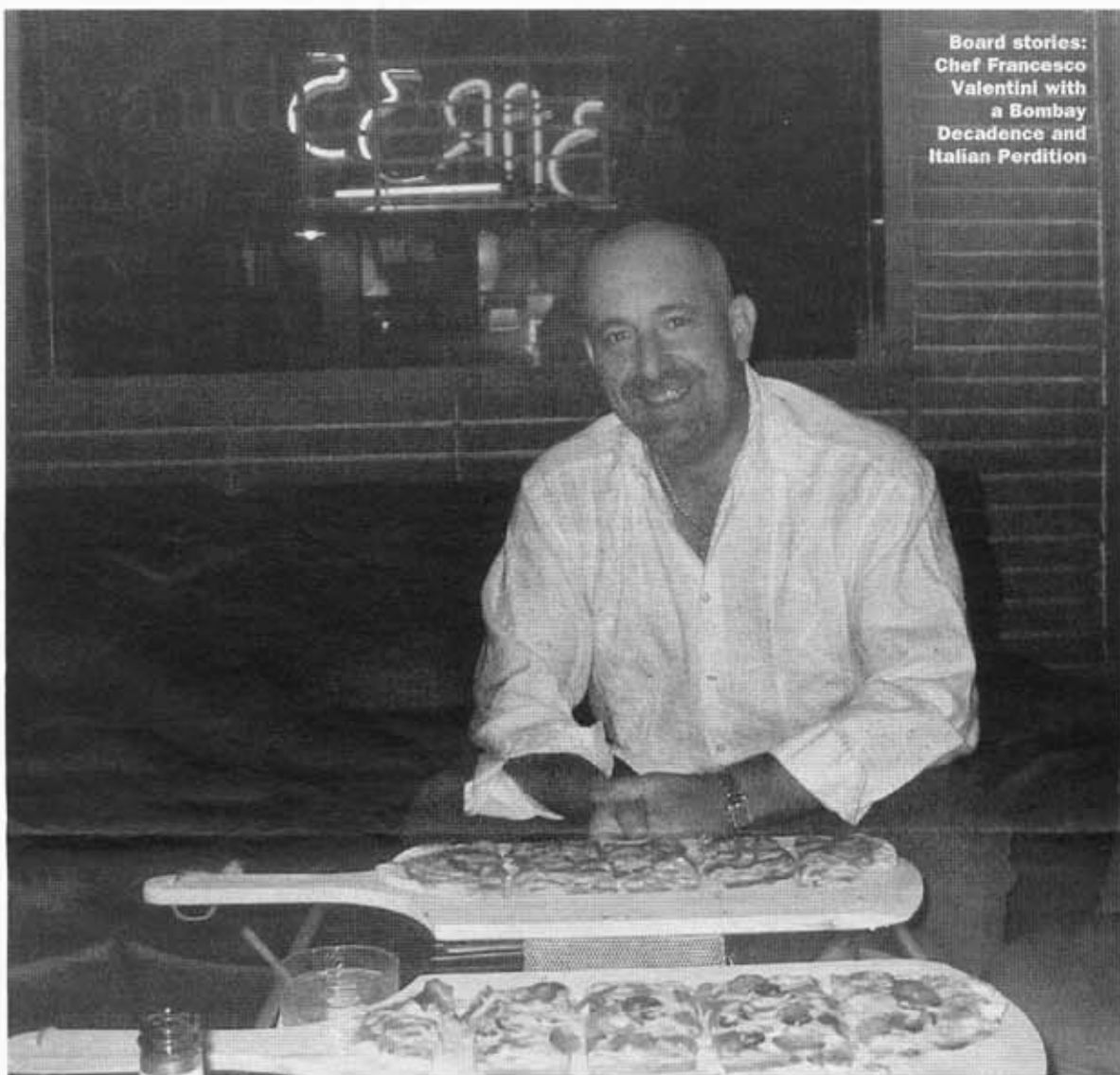


Around the world in eight pies

Global pizza express

Board stories:
Chef Francesco
Valentini with
a Bombay
Decadence and
Italian Perdition



LESA GRIFFITH

In the dark den that's Bar 35, where people sink back into black pleather couches and swig from an assortment of 116 beers, personal chef and caterer Francesco Valentini has commandeered the kitchen to make the universal snack food—pizza. But don't expect big round slathered with sweet tomato sauce and dotted with processed pepperoni.

Hailing from Siena (that's in Italy's Tuscany region, in case you didn't know), Valentini brings the Italian cooking sensibility of focusing on a few fresh ingredients—the classic Italian pizza includes only tomato sauce, mozzarella and fresh basil leaves—to international ingredients, to create a short global menu to go with the selection of beers (and wines) from around the world.

"For two weeks, I ate a lot of pizza," laughs Valentini. After experimenting with flavors, he settled on eight creations that take diners from Italy to India. Pizzas arrive as 14-inch long rectangles on wood planks that Valentini cut himself.

The basis for a good pizza is the crust and at Bar 35 it's light, thin and crisp, nicely blistered as it comes out of an electric oven. If you're used to big, gooey chain: pies piled with stuff, you might find Valentini's demure, pared down

pizzas anticlimactic, but flavor wise they're balanced, with each ingredient standing out yet melding well with its partners.

Valentini makes his own tandoori chicken, which appears as small chunks on the Bombay Decadence. An almost pestolike spicy spinach saag (an Indian dish of almost pureed leaves) is drizzled over the pizza, coated with the housemade tomato sauce and the common glue for all of them—mozzarella. Valentini sprinkles the whole thing with curry powder for good measure.

On to China for a Cantonese Kiss, dotted with morsels of slow-cooked pork and dollops of plum sauce (Valentini says he searched hard for one that wasn't cloyingly sweet). House-fried wonton strips add a crunchy dimension of texture. The only drawback is the miserly sprinkling of cilantro, which Valentini says is a result of too many cilantro-shy eaters.

But pizza is an Italian invention and it's the Italian versions that shine. Valentini tops the Italian Perdition with slightly spicy imported sausage packed with fennel flavor, the margarita is perfect simplicity and he darkens the crust of the Black Sea with squid ink (it's the color of taro rolls) and sprinkles it with subtly briny baby clams and shrimp sautéed in a spicy sauce.

The least popular item is one of

the best: La Dolce Vita. Yes, you can have pizza for dessert, too. You can't go wrong with chocolate and bread, and that's basically what you get—crust slathered with semisweet chocolate (which may be replaced with Nutella—yay!), banana slices and marshmallows that are melted until they are just a trace of sweet foam. It's a thin slab of pure comfort.

On a recent Thursday night, Bar 35 was buzzing with a mix of middle-aged professionals and scenesters having a snack before hopping next door to...Next Door, but there was enough elbow room to shanghai a corner couch and have an intimate conversation under a suspended big metal cylinder lamp. Or you can sit at the long bar against an exposed-brick expanse and look at the 99 (plus 17) bottles of beer on the wall.

Bar 35

35 N Hotel St between Smith St and Nu'uamu Ave (543-6549).

Hours: Kitchen open Mon–Wed 5–9PM; Thu, Fri 5PM–midnight; Sat 6PM–midnight

Pizzas: \$8–\$10

Recommended: Margarita, Italian Perdition, Bombay Decadence, Cantonese Kiss

Payment: AmEx, MC, V