

# Discovering Chinatown's Hidden Treasures



## TABLE TALK

JO MCGARRY

Hotel Street, despite many attempts to clean up its image, remains one of the more colorful sections of Chinatown, and not perhaps the first choice of anyone seeking a dazzling culinary experience.

But don't be fooled by boarded-up buildings and sometimes smelly sidewalks, because behind the dark and mysterious doors there's some seriously good food and cocktail going on.

Those who follow the city's growing group of talented mixologists know that there's an eclectic collection of wines, spirits and bartenders along with live music and events at thirtynine hotel. And right next door (sharing the 35 N. Hotel St. address) there's a refuge for anyone seeking great beer and near-perfect pizza. Leave the grimy street behind, step into trendy Bar 35 and prepare to be completely taken aback by the tastefully exposed brick, elegant European-influenced bar and chic private rooms hidden within. With more

than 200 beers displayed on the wall, a bevy of knowledgeable and enthusiastic bartenders on hand, and weekly beer tastings hosted by Hawaii Nui Brewing's Andy Baker, there's reason enough to venture down to Chinatown. Once you discover the gourmet fusion trademark of Francesco Valentini, and find yourself poring over a menu where pizzas have names like French Kiss, Sweet Bangkok and Gyromatic, well, it's hard not to get hooked.

Valentini, who was born and raised near Tuscany, has been mastering his thin-crust pizza for years.

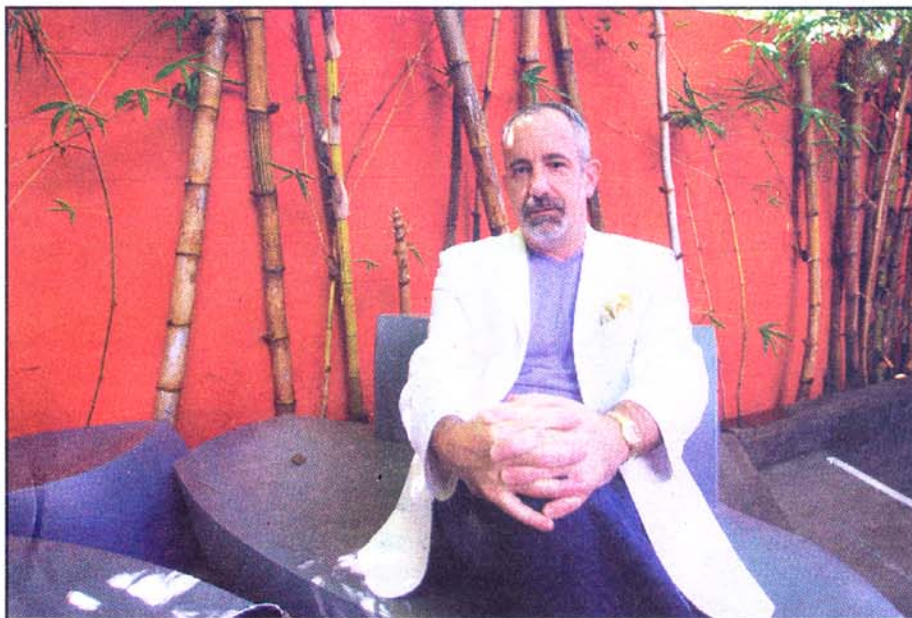
"There are some technical issues when you're trying to achieve the thinnest crust possible with perfectly balanced toppings," says the soft-spoken Italian. "But I think I have achieved the goal."

Pizza is something of an art for the chef, who also caters private parties and gourmet dinners by request.

"It's like a blank canvas for me," he says. "Like a painting, the pizza represents some of the food and the culinary culture I enjoy."

He's also determined to bring pizza — in the U.S., often nothing more than a soggy mess of cheese, sugary tomato sauce and an underdone crust — into the 21st century.

"It's time we thought differently about pizza," he



Chef Francesco Valentini in the courtyard at Bar 35

says.

His inspired creations include the aforementioned French Kiss (\$12), topped with soft, runny brie with ham, fresh pesto, tomato sauce, mozzarella cheese and fresh basil; an Italian Perdition (\$12) of spicy sausage, olives, anchovy,

tomato sauce and mozzarella, and the crunchy Veggielicious (\$12) with fresh zucchini, mushrooms, olives, tomato sauce and fresh basil topped with a sesame oil drizzle. All of the toppings are balanced atop a cracker-thin crust so brittle and perfectly baked

that it cracks on first bite. Valentini has been influenced by good food since he was a child, and he's been cooking professionally since he realized that, to be happy, his hobby would have to become his occupation.

"To me, it's all about

bringing together the best ingredients and having them inspire something wonderful," he says. Such as the New York-style pizza inspired by a bagel and cream cheese, or his occasional black pasta pizza dough made by adding squid ink to the flour and fresh seafood on top.

Sadly you can't stop by Bar 35 during the day and grab a perfect gourmet slice to go as they do in Italy (hours are from 4 p.m. Monday-Saturday), but I'm hopeful that one day there will be a second or a third Valentini Pizza joint open in town.

Pizza this good shouldn't just be eaten after dark.

For more information on Bar 35 and to hear an interview with Chef Valentini, go to [tabletalkhawaii.com](http://tabletalkhawaii.com).

Happy eating!

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