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TOPICAL

## Serving up bear hugs and handcrafted pizzas on-the-go

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JEFF COOK, QUAD-CITY TIMES

Tyler Slater, left, and Zack Slater operate Streets of Italy pizza at the Freight House Farmers Market in Davenport.

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John Anderson joked that the first person who bought one of his pizzas would get a high-five. But when the time came, the high-five morphed into a big, tackle-like, bear hug. He couldn't contain the excitement.

"It was long embrace, and it was a little bit awkward," Anderson said. "It felt good to hug him, and it felt really good to sell that pizza."

For Anderson, who is 36, that first purchase was an early indicator that his crazy dream might actually work.

And 5,000 pizzas later, he now has full-blown proof.

At farmers markets, parking lots and even some weddings, customers show up in droves for pizza from Streets of Italy, Anderson's food cart serving handcrafted pies on-the-go.

"You worry at first that no one is going to show up," he said. "But no matter where we go, people find us and wait in line, because there's nothing really like this here."

The thin-crust pizza is blazed inside a dome oven with a temperature of about 800 degrees. It cooks in less than two minutes and is topped with fresh ingredients — you can pick your own or go simple.

It's a style of pizza-making that Anderson, fittingly, borrowed from the real streets of Italy.

While he and his wife, Angie, were living in Germany during a three-year civilian assignment for the U.S. Army, Anderson wasn't shy about exploring via local foods.

"I tried everything I saw pretty much, because the way they viewed food was so different," he said. "It was more based on small mom-and-pops and less on chains, and it created all these unique flavors."

Nothing stood out more than the authentic Neapolitan wood-fired pizza he tried on a weekend trip to Italy. He was hooked.

"I immediately wrote the idea down for a business," said Anderson, who now works full-time at the Rock Island Arsenal as a contracting officer. "It became a crazy dream."


Even so, his friend Mike Schaefer came alongside for a piece of the pie. They opened the food cart together in 2013.

"This kind of thing, working with the outdoor element and the truck, is never dull," said Schaefer, who also has a full-time job at UPS. "You learn to always have a backup plan and another backup plan to make sure you can still serve the same quality pizzas."

In their third year of business, they say the quality is what keeps customers standing in line.

Options include breakfast pizzas, with eggs and ham and sausage, as well as weekly specialty pizzas, such as barbecue chicken and a Mediterranean style. The dough is Anderson's recipe but prepared ahead of time by Momma Bossa, a Quad-City based pizza company.

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"Not all pizza is the same, even though it's so common," Anderson said. "People can order a cheap pizza or store-bought all the time, but they choose to buy from us."

And customers often have to seek their pizza out. Sometimes, the food cart is parked outside Dunn Brothers Coffee in Bettendorf, but it's often a mystery.

"We don't always know our plan depending on weather and wind and who will let us park," Anderson said. "There's a little bit of mystique with that."

During the summer, count on a slice at the Freight House Farmers Market, where you can throw on fresh vegetables from area vendors and create your own pizzas. At the farmers markets, they'll easily make a few hundred pizzas in a few hours.

"It gets pretty intense," Schaefer said. "A lot of people will just kind of stand back and watch the fire because it's like dinner and a show; it's pretty theatrical the way we do it."

In the future, Anderson hopes to keep his dream cooking. They just purchased a second mobile oven and have plans to set up the cart more often and outside more businesses. They'll soon be outside the Daiquiri Factory in Rock Island on weekend nights. And, maybe one day, they'll open a storefront.

"We haven't left any dreams out," Anderson said.

But in the meantime, Anderson will keep handing out quality pizzas and quality hugs.

"For me, it's about loving people and serving them," he said. "I don't want you leaving here without you feeling like you're my best friend and with your stomach happy."

