

Spring has sprung at Franco Manca

A study conducted by Savoo analysed Google search terms to help determine the nation's favourite takeaways. Chinese came out of top with 41.33%, followed by pizza with 15.71% and then Indian a close third with 12.98%.

I must be in the minority – I can count on one hand the last time I have ordered a takeaway in the 25 years I have been living in Edinburgh, and secondly, as many of my friends know, pizza is one of the last cuisines I would choose if dining out. There's no real reason – I'd just rather have the constituent parts of the pizza toppings devised into a proper meal.

However, Stanley Tucci with his Searching For Italy TV programme which I devoured during lockdown and a trip to Naples in 2022, when we could finally travel again, changed all this. So, when Franco Manca invited The Edinburgh Reporter to try their new spring-summer menu, it was time to put my prejudices aside and give pizza another go.

From the sourdough pizza pioneers, there's a host of delicious newness including pizzas, starters, salads and desserts and specials which grace the blackboard in each establishment. Franco Manca's Pizzaioli team create pizza made from seasonally, locally sourced ingredients, and fresh, handmade

dough proved over 24 hours from an 18th-century starter.

We were eating at the South St Andrew's Street branch, but there's also another brand at Deanhaugh Street in Stockbridge which used to house Pizza Express with great views over the Water of Leith.

The vibe was buzzing on a Friday night with couples, single diners and tables of four, and friendly, attentive staff seeing to the diners' needs, dressed in stylish branded t-shirts, and chefs working behind a visible pass, behind which was a beautifully tiled pizza oven.

There are 70 Franca Mancas across the UK. Although a chain, Franco Manca's ethos is that good food takes time, but they don't mean between their ovens and our plates. Service is incredibly quick but not rushed. What they mean is everything in between. From opening their first establishment in 2008 to fresh harvests plucked, they believe in knowing where your food comes from and their menu celebrates the ingredient's provenance, which gives it an authentic touch.

For starters, we shared one of their blackboard specials, a creamy Burrata with rocket leaves, sun-dried tomatoes and the most beautifully presented grilled artichoke, which was like a flower and a platter of Italian smoked beef, wild rocket, Franco's grana, capers from Salina, black pepper & lemon dressing. The portions are very generous, and while we weren't able to finish everything, it wasn't because of a lack of flavour. Quite the opposite, both dishes were well-balanced and beautifully presented.

For the main event, Franco Manca has introduced four new pizzas to its famous lineup. There's the No.3, a delight for veggies, with traditional halloumi D.O.P. cheese, organic tomato, mozzarella, roasted peppers cooked with garlic and capers, caramelised red onions and watercress pesto.

Next up they have the controversial No.8, with free-range

chicken marinated with spices, roasted courgette base, mozzarella, Franco's grana, fresh mixed chillis and crunchy tarallini crumbs. And because I like to be controversial, this was a pizza that had to be tried. The chillis certainly packed a punch and took both of us by surprise by the heat of the chillies, but thankfully we had the Pinot Grigio: Nativo to wash the heat away!

Our smoked beef starter also comes as a pizza, the No.9, apparently a fan favourite but in my opinion, it was better without a pizza base.

And back by popular demand was the last pizza we opted to share – the No.10, with wild mushrooms, truffle pesto base, mozzarella, smoked burrata, truffle oil & fresh basil. I also ordered one of their dips, a seasonal wild garlic pesto, which was vibrantly green and fresh and the perfect accompaniment to dip the crusts of the sourdough pizza into. This was most definitely our favourite although we couldn't quite do justice to it all. But the staff will helpfully give you a box to take anything you can't eat away, which I promptly gave to one homeless person sitting outside a well-known burger takeaway down the road. He and no doubt his dog was delighted, saying it looked 'very posh'.

For our post-pizza treat, I opted for a scoop of Salted Caramel ice cream, which is possibly one of the best I have ever consumed while my dining companion opted for a digestif, an Amaro, a bitter, spicy, and herbaceous spirit.

If you're looking for affordability, and laid-back dining where everyone is welcome, Franco Manca has definitely cracked the Neapolitan café culture and they may finally have got me to re-evaluate my pizza prejudice!

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