

Dining | updated: 5/31/2017 12:15 PM

Homemade tavern-style pies a hit at Sal's Pizza Place in Huntley



Sal's Pizza Place in Huntley serves pizza for all tastes.

John Starks | Staff Photographer

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I've wanted to try Sal's Pizza for the longest time because word-of-mouth was that it was something special in a world of a million pies. I never did because it was a strictly carryout and delivery nook in Algonquin, too far for Sal's to deliver to my place or to insure a just-out-of-the-oven taste and texture if I carted it home myself. Now that Sal's Pizza Place (<http://www.salspizzahuntley.com/>) has a second dine-in (and delivery and carryout) location in Huntley, I have found the promised land of pizzeria heaven in McHenry County.

Sal Bongiovanni learned his way around a kitchen from his Sicilian grandmother, who lived with the family, leading to his first business in 1977, Mangia Pizza, back in his old neighborhood on Addison near Harlem in

Chicago. Carryout Sal's opened in Algonquin in 1996 and Sal's Pizza Place in Huntley has been satisfying pizza lovers at the sit-down restaurant for about a year. It's housed in the northwest suburb's tiny downtown area in a turn-of-the-century building with a storied past. The building lent its space to a number of businesses over the years, from a grocery store to a hardware store to a dance hall and a place where you could watch a movie upstairs for about a dime.

On our visit, although early on a Friday night, the place was packed with older and younger couples, extended families and lots of kids among the 48 seats in the dining room. There's also a seven-seat bar that was hosting a few regulars. The full bar serves cocktails, draft and bottled beer and wine.

Our waitress was efficient and pleasant despite every seat being filled with hungry diners.

Bongiovanni has been making pizza for more than 40 years and you can taste the know-how. This is neither an old-world Neapolitan pizza with a charred, bubbly crust nor New York-style folded triangles. Sal's serves a tavern-style pie, cut in the squares that any native Chicagoan covets and compares to what the old neighborhood joint served during hot summer days when cooking was out of the question. Sorry, John's in Bucktown, my childhood memory of your perfect pizza has been supplanted by Sal's thin but not flimsy crust, boulders of flavorful Italian sausage and enough cheese to worry Wisconsin.



Sal's Pizza Place in Huntley draws a crowd in search of authentic tavern-style pies. - John Starks | Staff Photographer

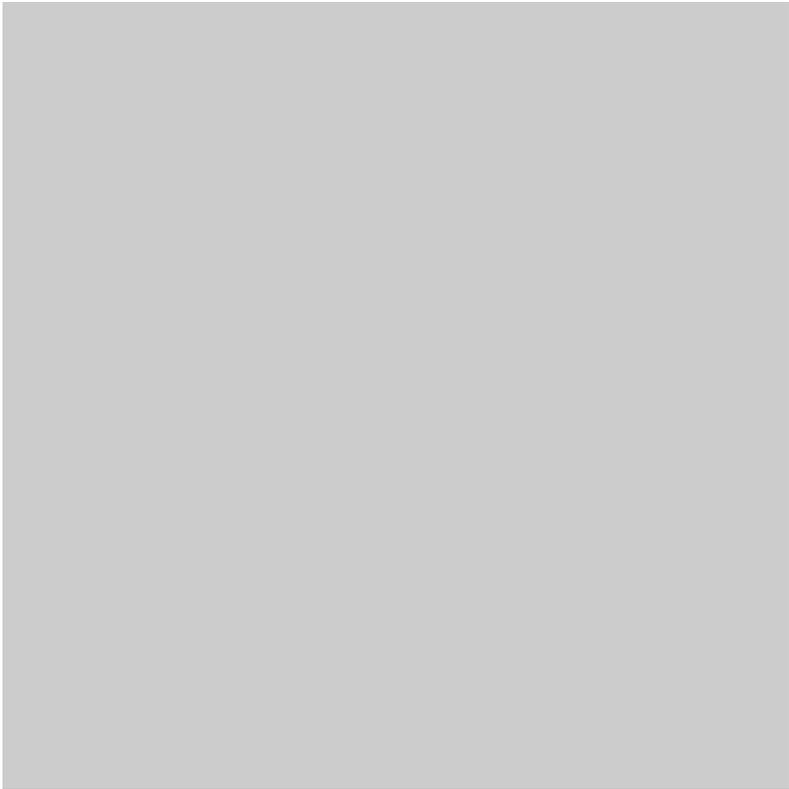
Sauce for pizza and pasta are Sal's own recipes and are made in-house. Dough is prepared daily, vegetables are freshly chopped and cheese is shredded the day you order your pie. Sal found a purveyor who makes Italian

sausage to his specifications, too. The kitchen does not skimp on ingredients, yet the thin crust holds up to the weight of the toppings. Bongiovanni explained that his stone oven allows the pizza to bake longer, which is better for flavor and texture.

"You can't cook pizza with a lot of cheese and toppings quickly," he said, "or you end up with undercooked toppings and a doughy center of the crust. Other places get around that by using precooked sausage and less cheese. We do it the old-fashioned way."

Sal's process costs a little more, so the pizza does, too. However, it's simply better, you won't be hungry again until tomorrow and you'll want to return soon.

A 12-inch thin-crust cheese runs \$13.75, with additional toppings checking in at \$1.80 each. Of course, you can customize your pie or pick one of the specialty pizzas (available in thin crust only). The kitchen turns out a lot of Chicago Specials (\$18.75 for a 12-inch) with sausage, mushroom, green pepper and onion; Meat Lovers (\$17.25) that includes sausage, pepperoni and bacon; and Sal's Special (\$20) covered in sausage, pepperoni, onion, black olive, tomato and green pepper. Choose among a number of meatless options like a Mediterranean and Margarita pizza, too. Although thin crust is the target of most customers' taste buds, Sal's deep-dish is his own recipe, baked in a pan with a buttery crust and loaded with ingredients.



The spicy shrimp appetizer is coated with Red Hook beer batter and tossed in a creamy, perky sauce at Sal's Pizza Place in Huntley. - John Starks | Staff Photographer



Chicken Parmesan, garlic bread, salad and beer and wine are on the menu at Sal's Pizza Place in Huntley. - John Starks | Staff Photographer

There are appetizers, but honestly, they're superfluous: fried poppers, cheese curds, fries, chicken strips -- the stuff you order for a finicky child. You might opt for wings, however, which are meatier and larger than most. Sal says they're popular "because they're a meal."

Not in the mood for 'za? The ribs (\$9.25-\$16.95) are homemade with Sal's own recipe barbecue sauce, and shrimp, simply breaded or coated with Red Hook beer batter and tossed in a creamy, perky sauce (\$7.50-\$12.95), are winning alternatives. I must say that I eyeballed another table's slab of lasagna (it took up the entire plate) and decided I'd have to try it on my next visit.

Pasta sauces are homemade, and dishes are made to order; prices range from \$5.95 for a simple spaghetti with marinara to chicken Parmesan served with pasta for \$9.25.



The large cheesy beef sandwich is baked before it hits the table at Sal's Pizza Place in Huntley. - John Starks | Staff Photographer

Among sandwiches, Bongiovanni's favorite is the cheesy beef "because the difference is it's loaded with cheese and baked." He says his Italian beef sandwiches are better because you won't see pounds of beef sitting in gravy all day resulting in a shredded and bland product. Other sandwiches include meatball (\$5.75); chicken Parm (\$7.50) and Italian sausage (\$5.25).

Dessert isn't much of a dilemma since it's Eli's Cheesecake plain or chocolate chip. Trust me, you won't even

get there after enjoying the bounty emerging from the casual kitchen at Sal's.

- Restaurant reviews are based on one anonymous visit. The Daily Herald does not publish reviews of restaurants it cannot recommend.

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