

MARKO'S PIZZERIA

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by **LAURA LIEFF**
photos by **DOMINIQUE TAYLOR**

Three decades is a long time to do anything – especially run a restaurant – but Marko's Pizzeria Owner Mark Esteppe continues to thrive. Hailing from Connellsville, Pennsylvania, he moved to the Vail Valley in 1985 (three months after graduating from high school) to live with his cousin and embody the “ski bum” lifestyle. Initially he worked for Vail Resorts as a Beaver Creek lift operator, and then at Deluca's Pizza in EagleVail, and then delved into seasonal work as a winter ski tech and summer landscaper. Eventually, he grew tired of the seasonal schedule and decided, along with his then-wife, to draw up plans for a pizzeria. That was 32 years ago.

While Esteppe says a lot has changed in the restaurant business over the years, the welcoming vibe at Marko's remains the same. “We see a mix of locals, tourists and families,” he explains. “Marko's has always been a family establishment. I have a five- and six-year-old and their daycare brings the classes over so everyone can make pizzas.”

When asked about the secret to his longevity in a historically fickle industry, Esteppe credits the people around him. “I have good friends and family living in this valley and we stick together,” he explains. “I go to the grocery store

and people say hello. Living here and knowing everyone is a blessing.” His circle of friends definitely includes his staff — three of whom (Charlie, Cuco and Borrego) have been working with him for 25 years each. Adding up their time at Marko's, as well Esteppe's

time, equates to over 100 years of pizza-making experience between the four of them. He adds, “I consider my employees family and that's why they have stayed with me all these years.”

As for the menu, the early years at Marko's featured a few pizzas, a couple of sandwiches and two salads. Now, the menu includes 16 pizzas, a variety of calzones and rolls, seven starters, wings, several salads, seven hot sub sandwiches, nine pasta dishes, a kids' menu and an array of desserts. Although the menu has expanded, original items include the Meatball Sub, the Caesar Salad and the Supreme Pizza.

Esteppe says the new favorite pasta entrée is the Esparza Alfredo, which is a spicy twist on the alfredo with jalapeños and mushrooms. The new favorite pizza is the Sweet Boarder — comprised of pepperoni, pineapple, jalapeño, cilantro and mozzarella. “I wouldn't still be here if people didn't like the food,” he adds. “I've been in this valley forever and know people from all walks of life. All I have ever wanted to do is make good food for everyone.”

A true member of the community, Esteppe appreciates the consistent business from the staff/employees at local schools (usually cheese and pepperoni pies), All Points North, the Shell station and the Vail Surgery Center. The pizzeria also serves food



PRICE

Starters | \$6 and up

Pizza | \$11 and up

Subs | \$13 and up

Pasta | \$14 and up

...

AMBIANCE

Local, casual and family-friendly

...

SIGNATURE DISHES

Sausage Sub, Garden Pizza
and Esparza Alfredo



until 10 p.m. (a rarity in Eagle County these days) and Esteppe says an impromptu pizza party might take place on any given night. “Good employees who make people happy are important,” he says. “That's what it's all about and that is why people come back to see us. We are good to the community and always make people feel like they are local and part of the group.” •

ABOVE Esparza Alfredo, a spicy twist on alfredo with jalapeños, mushrooms and shrimp.

LEFT Marko's owner, Mark Esteppe, tosses pizza dough for the lunch crowd after 32 years in business.