

New Pizzeria Mercato keeps diners coming back for more

Pizzeria opens on 408 W. Weaver St. in Carrboro

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After five years in the San Francisco sun, life has taken Gabe Barker back to Carrboro.

Two weeks ago Barker, 27, and his parents Ben and Karen Barker, James Beard-award-winning chefs and former owners of Durham's Magnolia Grill, opened Pizzeria Mercato at 408 W. Weaver St., just steps from the Carrboro Farmer's Market, which the restaurant draws upon for inspiration.

"A little over a year ago I came home for Christmas for the first time in three years, and my dad showed me the property," Barker said. "Looking at it now, it's such a huge transformation; it's hard to think back about the empty shell this was."

Barker, who's had no formal culinary training, grew up in Chapel Hill and graduated from UNC-Greensboro, initially planning to teach history.

"I grew up in the restaurant," he said, "and while I cooked for myself personally, it wasn't until San Francisco that I tried to cook for other people at all."

While in San Francisco, he moved around from a French restaurant to a Southern-styled restaurant, tried catering, and later landed a job at the acclaimed pizzeria, Delfina.

"It was intense," he said. "Busy every day, you would normally do anywhere from 300 to 500 pizzas a day. That's where I got my pizza training: as a sous chef there for almost two years."

Barker said Delfina showed him how pizza could be perfected.

"I love pizza like every kid," he said. "But what I loved about Delfina was the vegetable part of the menu and how often it changed."

He wants to emphasize the use of



Ben [left] and Karen Barker, former owners of Durham's Magnolia Grill, with son Gabe Barker help to open new pizzeria in Carrboro. The restaurant has become a popular dining spot since opening. (Staff photo by Grant Masini)

vegetables at Pizzeria Mercato, particularly with fresh produce from the Farmer's Market and Brinkley Farms in Creedmoor. "Especially for this community, that's so pedestrian, bike friendly and health-oriented," he said. "It just makes sense."

Barker said true pizza can be gluten-free, but wants to accommodate as many diners as possible with vegan, vegetarian options as well as gluten-free substitute dishes.

"I want this to be a neighborhood restaurant," he said, "and I've been blown away by the support so far. Seeing people come in four or five times when we've been open for two weeks is amazing."

Pizzeria Mercato is open for dinner Tuesday through Thursday and all day Friday through Sunday. He said the restaurant has been busy since opening, with a line at dinner every night.

"We're really lucky in that we've gotten so much support," he said. "We purposely installed the standing bar so people can have a beer or glass of wine

while they're waiting."

Barker said he hopes to have outdoor seating in time for spring, but Carrboro's parking regulations are holding up the process for now.

Natalie Schuster, a UNC-Chapel Hill student and writer for Spoon University, tried Pizzeria Mercato for the first time on Friday and was blown away by her experience.

"You can tell how authentic and real their process is," she said, "because the wait was long. We sat at the bar and got to watch Gabe and the rest of the staff prepare the food. It was straight from oven to plate, and that's a really gratifying thing to see."

For now, Barker is taking the experience day by day.

"I always anticipated this would be stressful, and I am working a lot," he said. "But I hired a great crew, they're stepping up to the challenge, and so far it's been smooth sailing."