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## The Oven Pizza e Vino

★★★★

7167 W. Alaska Drive, Lakewood, 303-934-7600, [www.theovenpizzaevino.com](http://www.theovenpizzaevino.com)**Recommended Dishes** Smoked portobello pizza, fork 'n' knife sausage sandwich

### Then

When it opened in 2004, the Oven Pizza e Vino quickly rose to hotspot status. Located in the new Belmar development, the Oven had the backing of Phoenix's celebrity chef and James Beard award-winner Mark Tarbell, and it served the dish of the moment, Neapolitan pizza. The wood-fired, thin-crust pie was gaining popularity, and the Oven, along with Proto's Pizzeria Napoletana, were the definitive places to get it.

### Now

That was five years ago. Today, artisanal pizza is the norm, with old and new eateries alike dishing up pies topped with salty prosciutto, house-made mozzarella, and fresh leaf basil. In the last 14 months, Marco's Coal-Fired Pizzeria opened in Ballpark, Lala's Wine Bar & Pizzeria moved into Capitol Hill, and Pizza Republica began tossing pies at the Landmark. Even the Kitchen in Boulder has flatbread pizzas on its menu.

**MAMMA MIA** Though no longer a trendsetter, the Oven still dishes up reliable and satisfying eats.

While the local scene has grown dramatically, the Oven's menu has barely changed since 2004. On any given day, diners order the same fresh field greens salad tossed with balsamic vinaigrette and oven-roasted tomatoes that has been on the menu since its inception. Or, they opt for a warm, melty bowl of fresh mozzarella to spread on rosemary and salt-crust pizza dough. Both paved the way for the standard pizzas, like homemade sausage or smoky portobello.

The menu is familiar and approachable, but it's no longer cutting-edge. That distinction goes to a restaurant like Marco's or the Kitchen, where gourmet cheeses top the pies, and the pizzas can be paired with menu items such as limoncello, coal-fired chicken wings, or exotic beers. But the Oven has created a niche for itself as a reliable neighborhood pizzeria—and within this market it does good work.

As you take a seat at a bar stool in front of the open kitchen, your server will announce any specials. While he may stumble when describing the marinara, you're likely to forgive him when a chef leans over with a spoonful for you to try.

The pizza's ingredients—whole oregano leaves, fresh greens, and house-roasted tomatoes—are fresh and without pretention. When the restaurant diverges from these wholesome flavors, it tends toward hearty comfort food. In the last several months, the Oven has finally added two new dishes. Playing off the current culinary obsession with bacon, the BLT pie layers creamy white sauce, fresh tomatoes, smoked provolone, succulent bacon, and baby lettuces for a pizza that's more decadent than its sister sandwich. And recognizing diners' love of cozy eats, the Oven also added the fork 'n' knife sausage sandwich (a riff on the meatball sub), which expertly stacks fresh mozzarella, tomatoes, basil, spicy sausage, and warm provolone between golden rounds of dough.

While not trendsetting, these new dishes are reliable—and, along with pizza, they speak to the kind of cuisine that every neighborhood needs. The Lakewood crowds, including families, that descend on the restaurant (sometimes as early as 5:30 p.m.) clearly indicate the eatery has a loyal following. But to regain its edge and compete with other players in the now-saturated field, the Oven could stand to further liven up its menu.

—KAZIA JANKOWSKI