



BACK FOR MORE

Proto's Pizzeria Highland

★★★★

2401 15th St., 720-855-9400, www.protospizza.com**Must-Try New Dishes** *No new dishes***Old Favorites** *Capri salad, margherita D.O.C.G.*

Then

Riverfront's Proto's Pizzeria was in its second year when *5280* critic Rachael Graves stopped in to review it during the spring of 2004. The bustling and unpretentious pizza joint had already developed a reputation for its Neapolitan thin crusts and Friday-night clam pies. Graves applauded both. Since that review, Proto's has expanded into Boulder, Broomfield, and Boise, Idaho. Most recently, one of the founding partners, Rayme Rossello, took a new job, forcing the restaurant into a period of transition just as Denver's pizza competition grows stiffer. In the last year, Marco's

Coal-Fired Pizzeria opened, Mici added a second location, and Parisi's pies have won increasing kudos. We returned to check in on the long-standing favorite.

Now

It was 8 p.m. when we stepped into Proto's warm, brightly lit dining room, where young diners sat flushed, enjoying quick conversation and pints of Stella Artois.

No tables were immediately available, so the hostess took our names and directed us to the bar. There we sat, absorbing the jovial atmosphere, until we noticed that the

A GOOD SLICE Proto's hand-tossed, Neapolitan-style pies are tastiest when topped with simple ingredients.

hostess was seating newly arrived diners.

She'd forgotten us. Our 20-minute wait had become a 40-minute ordeal. Later, after multiple meals at Proto's—when my lattes arrived as cappuccinos and the bartender inattentively filled our orders—I would realize that this sometimes lackadaisical, if friendly, service is simply Proto's style.

But tonight I didn't dwell on it, because once we sat down, our server was full of confident suggestions. The famous clam pizza, she assured us, was best with the white sauce—not red—along with bacon and tomatoes (\$10.99–\$19.99). The tomato and mozzarella salad (\$6–\$10), a house favorite, begs for the addition of prosciutto.

Almost as soon as this quick and chipper conversation ended, our salad was on the table. The tomato and mozzarella topped with thick slices of prosciutto and doused in caramel-y balsamic vinegar wasn't a light, summery version of the Italian classic, but it was tasty. One bite into the clam pizza, however, and I could tell that we'd overwhelmed the pizza's thin, breadly crust with potent ingredients. Proto's crusts, baked brown in the open kitchen's large Italian oven, require simple ingredients.

If I could reorder that night, I would have started with the Tuscan (\$6–\$10) or Capri (\$6–\$10) salads, which on future nights would woo me with their well-balanced international combinations of chunky Mediterranean tuna and briny capers, and sweet hearts of palm and tender kernels of corn. Then, I'd cut through the whole basil leaves, warm tomatoes, and fresh mozzarella of the margherita D.O.C.G. (\$14). Or perhaps, if I were craving saltiness, I'd opt for the ruby pie (\$9–\$17)—artichokes, feta, and kalamata olives. While neither of these pizzas are surprises—their ingredients have become the standard toppings at Denver's contemporary pizza joints—they satisfy in a familiar way.

But I'll have plenty of opportunities to order these pies in the future. Pam Proto, the business' solo owner now that Rossello has left, foresees no changes to the menu. Which means that on chilly Friday nights, when I have extra pocket change—the shop's pizzas, along with salads, desserts, and drinks, add up—I'll head to Proto's for a reliable dose of cozy comfort.

—KAZIA JANKOWSKI