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Mythic Pizza

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WHEN Domino's announced its Brooklyn Style Pizza, New York City had a predictable response. This newspaper ran a story comparing Domino's mass-produced creation with the legendary coal-oven pies made by Tototonno's in Coney Island. Food blogs were filled with indignant commentary about what makes a real Brooklyn pizza.

At Brooklyn Law School, our first reaction was to speculate that perhaps our borough's cuisine deserved to be protected with laws similar to those that protect unique regional foods in Europe. Champagne can be made only in a certain region in France, just as Parmesan can be made only in a certain part of Italy. Sparkling wine from Spain cannot be called Champagne, no matter how good it is, and cheese from Holland cannot be called Parmesan, even if no one could distinguish it from the real thing.

But the truth is, pizza in Brooklyn is not like these foods or wines. To gain special protections for the names of their places of origin, gastronomic products must be produced in a certain way, often with ingredients from a certain locale. Pizza that receives the approval of the Associazione Vera Pizza Napoletana need not come from Naples (at least one restaurant in New York has been approved), but it must be made a certain way, and its mozzarella, for example, must come from water buffalo in the region between Naples and Rome.

Pizza in Brooklyn, on the other hand, is extremely diverse. Some of it is sublime, and some of it is merely average. There is no single feature that characterizes it (not even the use of a coal-fired oven). We'd like to think that what defines Brooklyn-style pizza is that it is simply good pizza.

And that is just the point. No one in Brooklyn has claimed that the borough is home to its own pizza varietal; Domino's, based in Ann Arbor, Mich., invented that idea with its ad campaign. And in order to get that campaign to work, Domino's had to invent an entire ersatz Brooklyn.

According to Domino's Web site and television ads, the essence of a Brooklyn-style pizza is twofold: first, the people who eat it embody crude ethnic stereotypes, and second, its slices are so large that they must be folded to be eaten. The part of the Web site devoted to teaching America the three Brooklyn "methods" of folding a slice is obviously supposed to be parody, not anthropology. But parody of what?

Since it had nothing authentic to use as a context for its new pizza, Domino's took advantage of a handful of canned stereotypes: loud Italian-Americans, a boom-box-listening African-American and a cabdriver with a vaguely foreign accent who says things like, "You're the boss, boss!" These characters are supposed to "teach" you how to eat pizza like "you were from the neighborhood."

One might say that the turn to stereotyping was inevitable. Domino's wanted to market a product that had the look and feel of something deeply rooted in place and tradition, and in the case of pizza, that just doesn't exist in Brooklyn. Brooklyn is too complex and diverse to produce a food shared by every neighborhood.

The truth is, today there is no single Brooklyn style for anything, and that is one of Brooklyn's strengths. Excluded from the Domino's distillation of Brooklyn's essence are a lot of people: the artists of Williamsburg and Red Hook, the Haitian-Americans of Flatbush and young families fleeing Manhattan in search of backyards, to take but a few examples. Efforts to capitalize on Brooklyn's name that do not recognize the borough's diversity are not just silly. They show a certain degree of disrespect for Brooklyn.

If one looks at this from the perspective of cultural respect, then the law might actually play a role. Federal trademark legislation prohibits the registration of disparaging symbols. If Domino's were to register "Brooklyn Style" pizza and the symbolism that accompanies it, the borough could respond with the same kind of outrage as prompted a petition to cancel registration of the Washington Redskins trademark on the ground that "redskins" stereotyped Native Americans as "aggressive savages or buffoons."

The test is this: Does a substantial portion of the designated group find the symbolism degrading? For Domino's stereotypes, Brooklynites' answer may well be a resounding "Yes."

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