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Engine House steams to victory in city's pizza showdown

By Chris Cassidy
Staff writer

SALEM - Geoff Millar and his wife faced a familiar mealtime problem. "We had nothing for dinner," Millar said.

So for a \$5 donation to the YMCA, the Millars and hundreds of others grabbed a ballot and sampled slices from eight pizza vendors across the city. With only two restaurants left to try, Millar had a clear favorite: Engine House.

"I think it had just come out of the oven because we saw them running up with it," Millar said. "It was good cheese, good sauce."

The rest of the city seemed to agree. The downtown eatery came out the clear winner in Salem's first pizza-tasting contest, part of the weeklong Heritage Days celebration. Engine House captured the top choice in both the adults and kids categories.

"It all starts with a good dough," said Engine House owner Peter Dragon, who handed out more than 45 pizzas last night. "A bad dough is literally like cardboard. We still do everything by hand, and we still use single-deck ovens. For restaurant owners who take pride in their pizza, the event was an opportunity to put their best slice forward and hand out coupons to a crowd of more than 600 pie-hungry guests.

"It's \$6.50 on Monday and Tuesday," Cindy Gaudette shouted to a customer as she handed out a takeout menu. Gaudette and her husband, Ron, bought Roasted Peppers on Boston Street in January. While Ron cranked out pizzas back at the restaurant, another employee raced them down to the Common, unloaded them and passed them out to a line of ballot-carrying samplers. Most of the money raised goes back to the Salem YMCA to help make child care, swim lessons and other programs more affordable to lower-income families. "I'm thrilled by the turnout," said YMCA Executive Director Debbie Amaral. "It's an absolutely fun competition."

Amaral said the event will become an annual tradition. So how do you cook the perfect pizza?

"Only one person handles the pizza," said Nicky Tsalagkas of Essex N.Y. Deli & Pizza, referring to owner Jimmy Barkiotis. "If that person gets sick, I'm out of business."

"Basically, whatever the customer wants, we'll make it for them," said Joanna Kokonezis of Giovanni's.

"I like a crust that's cooked all the way through," said Kathleen Mullen of Salem. "A good sauce and a good cheese."

SALEM'S BEST SLICE

Adults category

1st place: Engine House Restaurant, 71 Lafayette St.

2nd place: Damatas Pizza, 33 Bridge St.

3rd place: Rockafellas, 231 Essex St.

Kids category

1st place: Engine House Restaurant, 71 Lafayette St.

2nd place: Roasted Peppers, 100 Boston St.

3rd place: Domino's Pizza, 4 Canal St.