

Scott Wiener and His New York City Pizza Tours

by Lucy Gordan | Food | 0 comments



Photo credit: Randy Duchaine

Born in suburban New Jersey, Scott Wiener has no Italian blood. His ancestry is Jewish Russian and Polish. Yet from an early age pizza became Scott's favorite food. And now, for the past eleven years, since April 27, 2008 to be exact, this Neapolitan specialty has become not only the center of his diet, but the subject of his livelihood. Scott's pizza tours consist of four walking tours in Manhattan and two in Brooklyn: Williamsburg and Downtown. Each of them visits three pizzerias. He also offers and guides himself a Sunday bus tour, which covers Manhattan and another borough by rotation and visits four pizzerias, which he chooses on the spur of the moment out of the 58 pizzerias he recommends around town. His Manhattan walking tours and the Sunday bus tour usually start at "Lombardi's" on Spring Street in Soho. Founded in 1898 and taken over in 1908 by Gennaro Lombardi from Naples, it's one of the oldest pizzerias in New York.

On May 5th, I took Scott's bus tour. We visited "Lombardi's", "Patrizia's" and "Best Pizza"

in Williamsburg, and Kestè in the Manhattan's financial district, where the owner Roberto Caporuscio, US President of the Associazione di Pizzaioli Napolitani, and his daughter Giorgia, give authorized courses in pizza-making.

Over our slices of pizza, Scott recounted the history of pizza in



Outside "Lombardi's" today



At "Lombardi's" in 1905

both Naples and New York, of our venues, and their different styles of recipes, not to the mention the difference between wood- and coal-burning pizza ovens. Afterwards I interviewed him at "Lombardi's". In addition to his love of pizza and his tours we talked about his collection of 1,480 pizza boxes and the book, "Viva La Pizza: The Art of the Pizza Box", he wrote about it.



Cover of "Viva la Pizza: The Art of the Pizza Box"

Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood; what are your first memories of food?

My first memory of food was a glass bowl full of colorful M&Ms. Other sweets. I remember my Mom baking a lot at home. She made a lot of Italian recipes, but never pizza which was always take-out.

So was she Italian-American?

No, 0% Italian. I'm of Russian and Polish Jewish descent on both sides of my family.

Your first memories of pizza?

It probably dates to elementary school. Friday nights Mom and Dad would leave us with a babysitter. Pizza in many ways was the food of freedom from parents, the food of independence. My fondest memories of back then are the first times I ever bought food for myself with my own money. It was pizza. It's not my first memory of pizza, but it's the memory of it most closely linked, which is why I think I still so in love with pizza today. Food is the ownership of whoever is consuming it. In a French restaurant you really think of the chef's dish; instead with pizza you very often think of it as "now it's become mine". Especially American pizza because you add oregano, chili flakes etc. after they've served it to you so it's no longer theirs; it's yours.

"Scott's Pizza Tours" were not your first job; can you tell my readers about your childhood, education, earlier jobs, and how you started the pizza tours?

I went to public schools in suburban New Jersey, and as soon as I possibly could, I started working. I just love working. I was an assistant teacher at a Hebrew School—that was my first ever job, -and then after that my first job working in the food industry was being a busboy at a "Chili's" in New Jersey. It's a chain of southwestern, Tex-Mex kind of food.

So have you always worked in food?

My gosh, no. I've hardly ever worked with food at all. That job was about it. The other jobs that I had were bizarre and all-over-the place. I worked "Toot's Birthday Parties"; it was like a store that did kid's birthday parties. You drop off your kids; they have their birthday party; you don't have to do it in your house and make a mess. That was one thing. That led to me organizing thematic birthday parties dressed in a costume- "Spiderman" for example. I did a lot of that. Then I found a job where I would dress up like the Statue of Liberty or Uncle Sam and wave at traffic during the tax season to try to convince people to do their taxes at this nearby shop in New Jersey. A bunch of weird jobs!

Then, as a career after college, I started working in recording studios and doing music production.

So where did you go to college?

Syracuse University. I studied television, radio, and film production.

How did you happen to start doing your tours?

I used to take my friends on little pizza-eating excursions for fun, in New Jersey, Philly, and New York. I would say, "I just read about three famous pizza places in the Bronx, let's jump in my car and go. But let's stop at this place in Brooklyn on the way back. So we would do that and that sort of snow-balled. Enough of my friends were interested that it made sense for me to rent a school bus. In late 2007 I rented a school bus and got all my friends on it and we went on an adventure. There were about 30 of us. That day I remember all my friends saying: "You've got to quit your job and just do this everyday." I took it as a joke until, about two months later, someone else said to me, "That thing that you did, I heard it was really fun, and friends of mine want to go on one of your tours." So I answered, "OK, let me look into what it might mean to run a tour company. It was nothing that I had any understanding of or any experience. Nobody in my family had ever done a similar thing. So I looked into it and it turned out to be not as complicated as I feared. So on April 27, 2008 I ran my first tour as a company.

Where did it go?

Four pizzerias. I think to "Lombardi's", "Patsy's", and maybe two in the Bronx. That has turned out to be the model for every tour.

Who was your mentor?

Tony Muia. He had a company called "A Slice of Brooklyn". His tours are of neighborhoods. I think he does a chocolate tour. His pizza tour goes to only two pizzerias and teaches you about the history of Brooklyn. Because I love pizza, I only want to do pizzerias. I want to tons of them and I want to change my venues every week so he helped me launch my tours. He introduced me to his insurance guy, his ticketing company, and helped me a lot with management.

What's your mission?

Making people happy is a good goal. Expanding people's knowledge of something that they think is so simple that it requires no deeper thought is abysmal. That is pizza on this tour. My hope is that after the tour they think of pizza more deeply, that pizza, something they grew up with all their lives, is far more complex than they thought.

I first heard about you from Kenny Dunn, the founder of "Eating Europe", who told me he was inspired to start his walking tours after taking one of your tours. He now has food walking tours in Rome, Florence, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Haarlem, Prague and recently in Lisbon; how many different tours do you have? Are any outside New York City?

I have no interest in expanding to other cities because I'm not interested in running a business. I'm interested in running the tours so that they work for my lifestyle.

We have six neighborhood walking tours; each tour is in a different neighborhood. Two are in Brooklyn: downtown Brooklyn and Williamsburg. In Manhattan we have the north

part of Greenwich Village, the south part of Greenwich Village, the East Village, and Soho. We have the Sunday bus tour, which I often guide myself, which starts and ends here at “Lombardi’s” in Soho and goes to three other pizzerias. We also offer private walking and bus tours, which can start anywhere. I choose the pizzerias.



Scott in “Lombardi’s Oven

So you also might not go to the same pizzeria every Sunday?
Exactly.

But I’ve read you’ve done pizza tours in Austin, Texas?

Yeah, I gave one pop-up tour there because a local tour company invited me. It’s a cool town with a quickly pizza scene!

How many pizzerias are actually part of your business?

Currently there are 58 in the rotation. They only exchange is buying the pizza and tipping the servers. The pizzerias don’t pay to be on my tours. It’s a relationship that builds up from our understanding of what they do and their appreciation of what we do.



Lombardi’s pizza

When was your first tour?

April 27, 2008. It went to the Bronx.

How many tours do you do a week?

From ten to fifteen. The walking tours have a maximum of 16 people; the bus tour 32. I design all the tours so I personally know all 58 pizzerias. I always do the tour at least 10 or 12 times before I hand it over to a guide.

How many guides do you have?

Eight plus me. Everyone is freelance and part-time. Some have a regular time commitment; some just fill in.

How many people have taken your tours?

About 70,000. About 20% at least come back for other tours. I don't have an exact breakdown, but most tours have someone who's toured with us before.

Where do they come from?

About 40% from the Tri-State area. The remaining 60% is mostly domestic tourists. Many are repeaters. We don't get many international tourists, less than 10%.

What about Italians?

Yes, but mostly northern Italians.

How do your clients learn about you?

On line or word-of-mouth.

What's your most popular tour?

The Sunday bus tour is always sold out, but we only do it once a week. The most popular walking tour is "cross-town". It starts here at "Lombardi's" and goes to two other pizzerias. It covers the essentials of understanding pizza in New York.

How often have you been to Italy?

Every other year. I mostly go to Naples, even if my last trip to Italy was to Parma. I've been to Rome, Florence, Catania, Siracusa, Taormina, Palermo, Amalfi, Atrani, and Sorrento, mostly in the south, but never on the Adriatic coast. I've never been to Venice. In September I'm going to Naples to be a judge in a pizza competition. I would consider doing a pizza tour of Naples once a year.

Where did you eat your first pizza in a pizzeria?

At "Grimaldi's". It was under the Brooklyn Bridge. It was a big eye-opener and changed my outlook towards food. It was the first pizza I had that used fresh mozzarella and put the sauce on top of the cheese. That to me was such a paradigm shift that I figured pizza was more complicated than I'd thought.

What's the best pizza you ever ate? Is it still the one you ate at "Da Michele" in Naples?

No, it was my favorite in 2009. I liked it less in 2011, and less again 2013.



Vincenzo De Luca, owner and pizzaiolo of "Pellone"



Ciro Salvo just opened a second
"50 Kalo" in London's Trafalgar
Square

Your favorite pizzeria there?

I think my favorite now in Naples is "Pellone". I also love "50 Kalò" and "Concettina ai Tre Santi", where Ciro Oliva is the pizzaiolo.

Do you like Neapolitan pizza more than "Roman" pizza?

Yes, but I also haven't been to Rome since 2011.

Your favorite pizzeria in New York City?

I don't have a favorite just because they are all different styles so to lump them all together doesn't honor their styles.

Do you have a favorite topping?

Sausage is probably my favorite for American pizzas; Margherita for Italian pizzas.

A topping you don't like?

Broccoli. I like the flavor, but I don't like the experience when it's long and stringy and gets stuck in between your teeth. It's fine if it's diced up.

What beverage do you drink with pizza?

Depends on the pizza. For a NY slice, can't beat a coke. If there's sausage involved, I go root beer.



Ciro Oliva

For Neapolitan pizza during the day, I do beer. At night, it's wine. Something bubbly.

Besides pizza, what's your favorite food?

Gelato and ice cream.

What flavors?

Stracciatella for gelato and chocolate or chocolate chip for ice cream.

Is there such a dish as a kosher pizza?

Yes. To be certified kosher every ingredient needs to be made in a certified kosher plant so must flours are already certified; lots of tomatoes are already certified. Cheese is the problem because, if it's cheese made with animal rennet, then it's not kosher, but if the curd has been made with vegetable rennet, then it's kosher. Rennet is the enzyme that separates the curd from the whey.

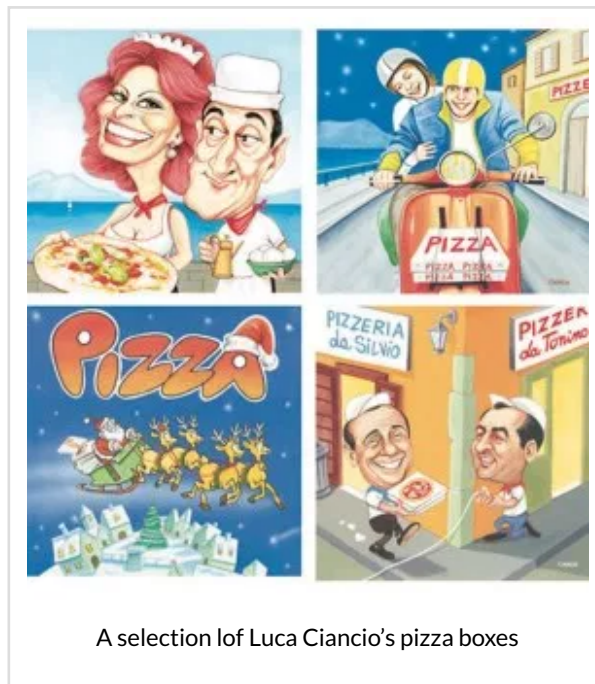
Can you distinguish a Kosher pizza from a non-Kosher pizza?

I've only ever had two good Kosher pizzas, that were not clearly Kosher. Only one, "Brooklyn Artisan Bakehouse", in Brooklyn's Crown Heights, is still in business. The pizza there is really good. The thing is that most people who order a kosher pizza, have never had a non-Kosher pizza, so they don't need to be that good because there's nothing to compare it to.

I've read many good reviews of "Juliana's", "Rubirosa", "Scarr's Pizza", and "Sottocasa Pizzeria"; are they ever on your tours?

Yes, only "Juliana's" is not because it's in a really busy tourist area so we clear of that. However, the pizza there is great.

I've also read that you have a collection of pizza boxes and have written a book about your collection; are pizza boxes, like Chinese fortune cookies, all made in the same place? No, there are a bunch of companies all over the country that make them and each one has its own designers. So you can tell if you see a box where it's from. Oh, that's a West Coast box, Oh that's an East Coast box. Italian boxes are printed differently from American boxes. Their technology is newer because take-out pizza's popularity is more recent there. American pizza boxes tend to be basic and boring while Italian boxes are more colorful.



Do you have them from lots of different countries?

Yes. People send them to me because they know I have a collection.

So where do you keep them?

Mostly in my closet in Brooklyn. Some are still in my parents' house in New Jersey.



Which ones are your favorite boxes?

My favorite is a Simpson's knock-off box. It's totally unlicensed; it's illegal.

I love it. It was printed in Italy but I got it in The Netherlands.

There is a bunch of really high art boxes from Italy designed by Luca Cincio.

I've never met him, but I hope to in September. I think he lives in Naples, yes.

I have more American boxes, but Italy is my no. 2, and probably Brazil is my no. 3.

Like Massimo Bottura, the world's no. 1 Best Chef according to San Pellegrino's World's 50 Best Restaurants



Luca Cincio at work

Awards, you run a non-profit; tell me about “Slice Out Hunger”?

The goal of “Slice Out Hunger” is to raise money that supports hunger-relief organizations so we don’t have our own end-goal. We don’t have a facility that we run. It’s really just a mechanism to raise money to support other organizations. We do events. We do one big event here in New York, where we get a bunch of pizzerias to donate pizzas. If each one of them donates 30 pizzas and then we sell the pizzas by the slice for say a dollar a slice, then the money that we raise from the sales gets matched by corporate sponsors. We’ve just done an event like that and the money we raised will go to support a women’s shelter in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Have you ever taken a pizzaiolo course at Kestè or in Naples?

I work with Roberto Caporuscio at Kestè all the time and have worked with Enzo Coccia in Naples. But I have never completed a full course for certification.

Even so, do you ever make pizza yourself?

Yes, every few weeks.

If you hadn’t started your pizza tours, what profession would you have chosen?

I don’t think I would have ever ended up in food. I think I would have stayed in television production, which is what I



Enzo Coccia



Roberto and Giorgia Caporuscio

studied and had my first jobs. I studied documentary film making in college, but I probably would have done audio work. Music production would probably have been my ultimate goal. Probably recording music for bands.



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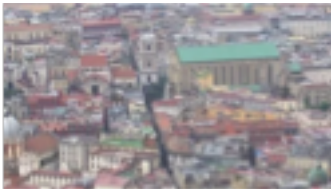
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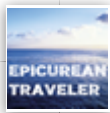
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