Slice of heaven

FOOD ROB BROADFIELD

PIZZICA IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK. IT'S A traditional folk song accompanied by tambourine and violins. You thought it was something to do with pizza right? Me too, until I read the introduction on the Pizzica menu, which goes on to explain the link between an ancient peasant song and a subterranean pizza bar in Margaret River. It's a long story.

The people of Margaret River will not be happy with this review. Pizzica is their not-so-secret secret spot, and then along comes a critic and ruins it all. Pizzica is one of the most authentic, generous, unpretentious and rustic pizzerias we've encountered outside of Italy. In fact, there are pizza and pasta restaurants we've eaten at in Italy which are not a patch on this little restaurant.

One doesn't want to get all mawkish over a restaurant but Pizzica is an emotional experience. Joyous even. Soft golden lighting, the warmth of raw, red brick walls, low ceilings, a windowless basement setting with nooks and crannies, rough-hewn tables and a caged, wrought-steel wine cellar that looks

like it had been fettled by Harry Potter's Hagrid. Ancient? Not so much. Pizzica is in the cellar of a substantial (faux?) Federation era house on Margaret River's main drag.

Before we go on, a note on scoring. We get lots of letters querying our scores. "How can he give it just 14 out of 20 when he's raved about it," is typical. Totally understand — we struggle to get our scoring right, too. This Pizzica story is a rave review, as you will see, yet it gets 14 out of 20, not because it's being penalised but because it is being reviewed against full-service restaurants such as Wildflower and Leeuwin Estate and Vasse Felix. Our suggestion? Read reviews in the context of the score, not as separate entities. It is possible to have a banging restaurant with a score of 14, as is the case here.

Anyhoo, on with the review

The food at Pizzica is next level. Pizza is the thing but the kitchen cranks out a porchetta the likes of which we've rarely seen. There's a range of woodfired meats and stuffed breads called puccia and a strong line-up of wood-roasted meats including pork

ribs, lamb chops, free-range chicken and a 400g T-bone. You'll want to wash this all down with a banging brunello, a silky sangiovese or a stunning super-Tuscan. The cellar is small but there's some ripper titles behind its medieval steel gates.

Antipasti platters come in two varieties, meats and cheeses and just cheeses, both \$30. We're not fans of cheese as an appetiser, so without any fuss or harrumphing, the cheese component was replaced with slices of porchetta. To say it was awesome risks understatement. Too often porchetta is cooked dry. This was soft and sweet, moist and scented with fresh herbs before being rolled, tied and roasted. One of the best ever. The thinly sliced salamis, cured meats and hams were some of the best we've had.

We were almost giggly with excitement. This food and service would win culinary awards in Italy, let alone Margaret River.

There is an almost endless array of pizzas in various forms. Pizze rosse — made with a red sauce base — accounts for 12 pizzas. There were five pizze bianche, which are baked with just olive oil as the "sauce".

They are a credit to the dough maker, with all the flavour and nuttiness one expects from good flour, properly fermented. The edge was puffed up like Donald Trump at the UN and with the right proportion of scorch marks from the wood fire. Its base was thin and toppings were minimally applied, as they should be. Pizza diavola, \$22, is a margherita with hot sausage. Pizzica's was a masterclass in correct ratios of tomato sugo to toppings to pizza base. Ditto a margherita, \$20.

Dishes don't come with fashionable garnishes or affectations. When the menu says lamb chops, that's what you get. If you want a garnish with your roast meat you can order mixed salad or woodfire baked potatoes with rosemary, both \$10.

Be warned fellow gastronomes: Pizzica is about as far removed from the region's famous, posh winery restaurants as you can get. It is humble and rustic. But it is neither slapdash nor lazy. The service is delivered with pace and confidence — there are no clueless, bombed-out surfer dudes stumbling around in this restaurant.

Imagine you've been driving flash, modern cars all your life, then you hop on an older English motorcycle and take a drive in the country. You're transported back to primal, simple pleasures. Artifice is stripped away. It's the sort of experience that makes your heart sing. And so it is at Pizzica. It's what hospitality and fair dinkum food should be all about and so rarely are.



THE BUZZ

Pure unalloyed, unsophisticated,

unpretentious and humble fun.

Excellent cooking underscored by brisk and cheerful servers.

Wonderful, magical room, It's a

"must do" when in Margaret River.

SUPER SLICE THE PIZZA PLACE PUTTING ITALY TO SHAME

