

Chris Kelly: Pizza part of Scranton's DNA

CHRIS KELLY / KELLY'S WORLD

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Carm Pellegrino is an old-fashioned craftsman. His calluses tell the story of 34 years spent slicing pepperoni by hand. Carm cuts it thick and spreads it thicker.

"I'm set in my ways, for better or worse," the part-owner of Maroni's Pizza House in West Scranton said as he laid a tray of greasy, gooey goodness on our table. I was there to meet the makers of "Tray: A Cut of Culture," a documentary film that explores the impact of pizza on the life and times of Northeast Pennsylvania.

I suggested we meet at Maroni's because it's one of my favorites. Why? The pepperoni, of course. Also, Chrissy grew up loving it. If I rejected Maroni's pizza, she probably wouldn't have married me. She was not happy that I shared a tray with strangers on Thursday and didn't bring home leftovers. I may as well have had an affair.

My lunch dates weren't strangers for long. Around here, pizza is family. Recipes have been passed down for generations, and generations have been raised on those recipes. Dough, sauce and cheese (onions optional) are basic ingredients baked into the region's DNA, which inspired Team Tray to make a movie.

"We see an opportunity to show people at their best, instead of at their worst," said Jeremy Saltry, 28, a Scranton native who lives in Portland, Oregon. His partners are Joey Dominick, 28, of Scranton, Lindsay Barrasse, 32, and David Corigliano, 32, both of Dunmore. All bristle at Scranton retrospectives that focus on why it supposedly sucks to live here.

"Pizza is such a great tradition here, such an important part of the community's identity" said Joey, who, like Jeremy, had childhood birthday parties at Maroni's.

"It brings people together, regardless of social status or religion or whatever," added Lindsay. "Once that tray hits the table, everyone is equal and focused on eating. Has anyone ever been in a bad mood while eating pizza?"

No one answered. Our mouths were full. Anywhere else, a documentary about a community's relationship with pizza would seem a half-baked idea. Here, you can buy individual cuts wrapped in plastic at gas stations. It's not even warm.

"I buy those all the time," Lindsay said. She wasn't kidding, but is somehow skinny.

Scranton was recently named Pizza Capital of the Nation by real-estate website

FindTheHome.com, which used census data to determine that the Electric City has the highest per capita density of pizzerias of any American city of at least 40,000 citizens.

Old Forge residents have long bragged that the borough of just over 8,000 is the Pizza Capital of the World. Visit on a Friday during Lent and become a true believer.

Between Ash Wednesday and Easter, pizza is the staff of life in Northeast Pennsylvania. It is an essential aspect of religious observance, community pride and family tradition. Some give up drinking for Lent (with an occasional mulligan for Scranton's St. Patrick's Day Parade). Others swear off swearing, smoking, chocolate, coffee, gambling, gossip and any number of other indulgences.

No one gives up pizza.

And the makers of "Tray" won't give up on Scranton. Belief is a choice. Jeremy, Joey, Lindsay and David are part of a vanguard of young natives and transplants who see opportunity where the Old Guard focuses on obstacles and strives to keep them in place.

These four filmmakers are inspired by Scranton and its neighbors. I am inspired by them. And Carm Pellegrino's callouses.

You can meet Carm tonight from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Backyard Ale House on Linden Street. For a \$20 cover, guests get domestic beers and pizza from Salernos' Cafe, the New Elio G's Pizza Shop and many more.

"It's going to be Scranton's biggest pizza party to date," Jeremy said. "It's a great way for people to get out and say thank you to these people who play such an important part in our culture. Plus, you get to eat pizza."

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