

THE NEW MEMBER WHO JUST OPENED A STANDOUT NEIGHBORHOOD
PIZZERIA

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PHOTO BY AZIKIWE ABOAGYE

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By Zach Schiffman

Ben Wexler didn't grow up in Park Slope, but he might as well have. A born-and-raised New Yorker, he spent the pandemic years running a seasonal pizza business on Peaks Island, off the coast of Maine—all while his girlfriend held down an apartment here and a Coop membership going on 10 years.

But the city kept pulling him back. So this past November, after a long hunt for the right space, he opened Il Leone just around the corner from the Coop on Seventh Avenue: a sit-down wine bar built around long-fermented sourdough Neapolitan pizza, with the produce treated as the main event.

That obsession traces back to a stint on a small organic vegetable farm, where picking what he'd cook each morning rewired how Wexler thinks about food. It's a philosophy that lines up neatly with the Coop's, which makes his timing perfect: after years of circling, he's finally an official member. We caught up with him just as his first New York tomato season comes into view, to talk Maine, Naples, the heirloom seeds in his backyard and how to shop the Coop like a chef.

How did Il Leone come to be on Seventh Avenue?



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Ben standing in front of Il Leone.

I started the business on Peaks Island, off Portland, Maine, during the pandemic. I'm a born-and-raised New Yorker but went to college in Maine, then moved back and was mostly working on political campaigns. In between campaigns, I did various things in the food business, including working on a small organic vegetable farm.

Right before the pandemic, in about 2019, I was burnt out from living in the city and wanted to move to Maine and start this business. At first I was looking to start it on a farm up there, partnering with a farm, and then when the pandemic hit, that fell through. So I started it on the island instead and lived up there for a few years, running it as a seasonal business, and I just really started to miss the city. The native New Yorker in me was pulling me back.

My girlfriend was living here in Park Slope, so I'd spend some of my off-season time down here in the winter, exploring what the business might look like in the city. After a few years of looking at spaces, I found the one we're in now. Having spent that off-season time in Park Slope, it just felt like a really great fit. There was a dearth of restaurants in the neighborhood, and not a lot of people doing conceptually what I was trying to do. So that's how this all came about.

How much of your business is local repeat neighbors versus people from all over the city?

I'd say we're about 75 percent Park Slope right now. I started this to first and foremost be a place for the neighborhood, and the reception's been really positive. People are just looking for another restaurant to go to, whether it's with their kids or without. They love that we emphasize sourcing as locally and organically as possible, and that we offer a sit-down wine bar experience alongside the pizza and the food. They love that we're doing the sourdough with a really long fermentation, putting a lot of love, care, and intention into the food. It's been a really positive first six months.

Have you been aware of customers who are Coop members?

I haven't asked, so that's hard to say. But a lot of the Park Slope community are members. My girlfriend has been a Coop member for 10 years, so I'm very familiar with it, and there have definitely been customers who've mentioned they work there. I'm sure many members have come through our doors.

Living in Maine, with your girlfriend being a member—what was your awareness of the Coop as you were going back and forth?

I've known about the Coop for years, just from being a New Yorker. Right out of college I had a sublet in Park Slope and I was on the verge of joining about 10 years ago, but didn't, because I ended up moving out of the neighborhood. Growing up here, I've always respected what it does—both as a community model for increasing access to affordable, quality fresh produce, and just as a great grocery store. The foodie in me loves a grocery store that has a lot to offer, and the Coop clearly stands out as one of the better ones in the city.

How does your experience working on farms change you as a restaurant owner?

The most fulfilling part of working on that small organic vegetable farm was getting to pick what I'm cooking with that day. It really drew me back to the roots of not just Italian cuisine, but Neapolitan-style pizza making—because in Naples, where pizza was invented, there's such a profound emphasis on simplicity, the quality of ingredients, and sourcing everything as locally as possible.



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Ben in his restaurant backyard planting basil, which he uses for his dishes.

I came to realize more and more that what makes the best food, particularly the best Italian food, is not overdoing it—using just a few really great ingredients. That’s how you make the best tomato sauce: just tomatoes, olive oil, and sea salt. You don’t need oregano, you don’t need garlic, you don’t need all these add-ons. The best pasta in the world, arguably, is just a simple spaghetti pomodoro with in-season tomatoes and some fresh basil. That’s what Neapolitan pizza has always been about.

So as a pizza maker, I was really excited to bring that philosophy to my pizza. There are some people doing Neapolitan-style pizza, and some doing sourdough Neapolitan specifically, like Anthony Mangieri of Una Pizza Napoletana, who I’ve always looked up to. But I feel like there aren’t that many people in the city really offering a “farm--to-pizza” experience, focused on the quality of the produce. That’s an area I’ve focused on since working on that farm.

How are you feeling about your first tomato season in the city?

We opened in November, so we haven't had a tomato season yet. This'll be my first one open in New York. I'm so excited. For the last five years in Maine, I've done a pizza I call the "l'estate," which means summer in Italian. It's literally just peak in-season heirloom cherry tomatoes from a small organic farm, ripened right on the vine. When you harvest cherry tomatoes at peak ripeness, there's just nothing like it—they carry so much flavor, unlike any tomato you'd find in a grocery store. I'm so excited to get that pizza back on the menu.

There's another we do in summer called the "Fiore," with squash blossoms and local organic zucchini—also really special. And there's one we'll be doing shortly with in-season garlic scapes from the farmers market.

In Maine I got all my produce from one or two small organic farms, and those partnerships let me develop a lot of these pizzas. They rest on traditional Italian ingredient combinations, but they also work because we're able to get such great produce. We're just getting into farmers market season here, and I'm so excited to start putting some of these seasonal pizzas on the menu—that's part of the challenge of launching in late fall and early winter, not being able to do quite as much with in-season produce as we traditionally have.

Is there anything you're considering trying here that you never did in Maine?

Of course. We love to try new things. We've got a few things in the works with some really special heirloom tomato seeds that I'm actually growing in my backyard at the restaurant right now. I won't announce it just yet, until the tomatoes are ready, but there's some fun stuff coming.

I'm a big believer in walking through the farmers market, talking to farmers, and seeing what looks exciting and what's going to work on a pizza. One we're doing right

now that's been a big hit is organic asparagus with fresh lemon spritzed on top, fresh mozzarella, pecorino, and black pepper. As we transition out of asparagus season, we'll start doing the garlic scape pie I mentioned, and some others as the summer heats up.

As we head into summer-produce season, do you have any advice for people shopping at the Coop?

I always like to shop as much as possible day-of when I'm cooking. You generally get the freshest stuff that way. I keep an eye out for what looks really perky and fresh, what was truly just harvested that day or the day before. That always makes for the best meals in my experience. So use your eyes and follow your heart, and see what's truly poppin' on those shelves. That's going to lead to a lovely dining experience.

Zach Schiffman is a social editor and writer at New York magazine, comedian, and Park Slope local.