

*Best of* St. Clair & *Best of* Alabama

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The Little Pizza Joint That Could  
**Carpenetti's named  
Bama's best pizza**



Frank Carpenetti



Story by Loyd McIntosh  
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The parking lot of Carpenetti's Pizzeria in Moody is packed! Cars are squeezed into any opening their drivers can find – around the back of the building, in the grass, in the dead zone between the restaurant and the Chevron station next door.

Inside, hungry diners jockey for attention from the hostess for one of only about a dozen tables as a steady stream of people queue in line for what seems like an endless run of take-out pies. The phone rings off the hook, the small staff constantly runs back and forth from the kitchen to the house, and pizzas fly in and out of the brick oven at a quicker pace than the ending sketch of an episode of the *Benny Hill Show*.

And the kicker is, it's only *Tuesday*.

It's abundantly clear the word leaked out that Carpenetti's Pizzeria has been named the best pizza restaurant in Alabama. "Business has picked up a lot," says owner Frank Carpenetti.

"As you see tonight, there's a waiting list, and it's pretty much like this every night. People have to sign in now. It's organized chaos. Sometimes. It looks like everybody's running in 10 different directions, but only up to a point."

The competition for Bama's Best Pizza, sponsored by the Alabama Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association and the Alabama Farmers Federation Dairy Division, asked for nominations from the general public in the early rounds to determine a final four. At that point, a group of judges would visit each of the four finalists to nosh on some pizza and award a champion.

Carpenetti's beat out some restaurants with great reputations, including Giovanni's Italian Restaurant in Sylacauga, Valentina's Pizzeria & Wine Bar in Madison and Top-Notch Pizza & BBQ from Vernon. Carpenetti said he had no idea the restaurant was under consideration for the competition until the very last day of public voting.

"We were real surprised," says Carpenetti.

"Someone came in with an advertisement, and so we called a few people and they said, 'Yeah, we'll get in on that,' and all the customers that were in here all voted for us."

Once Carpenetti's advanced to the final four, the judges visited each restaurant, sampling an array of pizzas. The only requirement was a pepperoni pizza. Everything else was wide open. Carpenetti decided to give the judges a stuffed "all the way" pizza and a spinach alfredo pizza with chicken and bacon. Carpenetti said while he didn't know what to expect during the judging, it wasn't long before he had a good feeling.

"We just gave them everything we could that we thought would wow the judges," he says. "I got a good feeling from it. I thought I would have a chance if I could get them in here to eat. They seemed to really like everything, and when they got all done, they said everything was great."

Winning this competition is a validation of almost a quarter-century of hard work.



**Taste-tantalizing  
creations**





## Best of ... **A look inside Carpenetti's kitchen**



**The Carpenettis  
at the helm of a  
'family affair'**

### **The road to Moody and Bama's Best Pizza**

Carpenetti grew up on a dairy farm in Watertown, N.Y., a working-class town of 30,000 just 30 miles from the Canadian border and 300 miles from New York City. He had 17 years under his belt as a machinist when he accepted a job offer in Moody. It wasn't long before Carpenetti realized things weren't working out with his new company but moving back north wasn't an option. He and his family had already come to love Moody, and his brother had moved to the area as well. Carpenetti asked himself, "What do I do now?"

What he did was open a pizza joint.

"I started this because I couldn't find what I like. I don't like conveyor belt pizza. I like New York-style pizza. So that's what I did," Carpenetti says. "I had already moved everything down here. My brother moved down here, so we just stayed. I love it here."

In reality, the original Carpenetti's Pizzeria aspired to be a joint. Opened on Aug. 7, 1997, Carpenetti's Pizza occupied a tiny space affectionally called "the hole" hidden behind the old CVS Pharmacy on U.S. 411.

Those early days in the restaurant business were tough as he

worked to establish his restaurant and perfect the recipes that would eventually be heralded as the best in the state. "It was hard because I actually had to go out and get other jobs doing some different things. I was doing anything from raking leaves to cutting grass, whatever it took," he said. "But I had to do it because I wasn't going to give up. There were a lot of a lot of days when I thought, 'What did I get myself into?' But it's worth it."

After two-and-a-half years, Carpenetti's moved across the highway to a strip mall next to Fine Pools & Spas where they stayed for another seven years. For the past 15 years, Carpenetti's has occupied the former location of Shaw's Barbecue on Park Avenue across the street from Moody City Park. The old barbecue pit was just big enough to fit Carpenetti's brick-fired pizza ovens. "We've only got about an inch-and-a-half clearance for these ovens," Carpenetti says. "They just happened to fit. They just happened to fit perfectly in there."

Carpenetti's day starts at 6 a.m., with the exception of Tuesday when he arrives at the restaurant at 5 a.m. Other staff





His signature, hand-tossed dough is foundation for a great pizza.



— mostly members of this close-knit family — arrive around 8 a.m. to prepare for the lunch rush at 11 a.m. One of the aspects that differentiates Carpenetti’s from others is the pizza dough, which is made fresh each day. Carpenetti also forgoes the use of equipment to stretch the dough, opting for the traditional method of tossing the dough in the air, a technique that not only makes for a better pizza but it also an entertaining crowd-pleaser.

“All of our pizzas are hand-tossed. A lot of places use a press. We don’t do that. We do everything by hand. Maybe it’s because I’m old school,” Carpenetti says. “Sometimes when we’re not real busy, we’ll see a kid watching, and we’ll say, ‘Hey, come here. Do you want to make your pizza?’ It’s great to see the smiles on their faces.”

A family business, Carpenetti is surrounded by relatives who put the family name on the line each day. Carpenetti’s wife, son, daughter, brother, daughter-in-law, grandson and granddaughter all work at the restaurant, as well as several long-time employees who have become honorary Carpenettis. He credits their work ethic and dedication to the restaurant’s



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Pepperoni pizza  
heads for oven

success.

"Everybody here works so hard. I mean, you don't see any of my people just standing around. They're always doing something," Carpenetti says. "It ain't it all glitz and glamour. There were some hard times, but right now, I'm just so proud of everybody here."

More than 24 years since taking a chance on bringing New York-style pizza to St. Clair County, the recognition Carpenetti's is getting is well-deserved. But none of it would be possible without the loyal customers – the early supporters from their days in "the hole" and the new fans alike – who have made this little pizza joint into an institution.

"Thank you for your support over all these years," he says. "We couldn't have done it without you. I think we have the best customer base anywhere."

That customer base is about to grow. Big time.



An icon in  
Moody