

We Love Macon Pizza

By Van Newell

We Love Macon Pizza is the not worse name for a pizza place. I mean, it features the name of our city with a punning phrase. I started here when I was fifteen, because I wanted a nicer guitar than the one I got on my birthday. After working here for two years I get out of school at noon and come here until the dinner customers leave. Fridays and Saturdays I help close. I once heard from a customer that the owners, Russ and Dee, like me because I don't smoke pot and I don't serve my classmates beer. Technically, it's illegal for me to serve beer but no one is going to ring the cops over that. But the real reason I'm still working here is because I'm in puppy-dog love with a coworker: my girlfriend, Anne Emily. Her grandmother runs a flower and candy shop in the same decaying strip mall, and her parents are chiropractors with an office in-between the nail salon and the We Love Macon Pizza. After Anne Emily's grandparents fled Saigon in 1975, they found that the humidity of South Georgia reminded them of their home country and it was a cheap place to try your luck. There is both a military base and Baptist university in town, which meant there are plenty of people who need to buy flowers for both romantic and "I-messed-up-big-time-please-forgive-me" reasons.

Anne Emily and I take turns making and tossing the dough, then switch up and apply the marinara sauce (the secret ingredient is adding brown sugar), the toppings, and then, and only then, applying the two-thirds mozzarella, and one-third provolone mix of cheese. We Love's idea of uniqueness is not skimping on the cheese like the chains do. Even after two years I toss the

dough and cut the vegetables and meats with the heaviest knife we have, slowly and methodically, much more slowly than my girlfriend. I've got anxiety issues. I once sliced the top of my hand and immediately began to bleed on the pizza I was preparing. Some jerk customer saw me and said he was going to call the health department if we didn't give him "a hundred, no make that two hundred, bucks." He took a picture of me with my hand on his phone.

Anne Emily threw a pail full of uncooked pork at him and said, "that's close to two hundred dollars worth." After work that night, I told her that love is a verb. I said I'd let it be her choice, I'd propose to her either at Medieval Times or at Six Flags. "Not good enough," she said. "My love is more costly. Only after flying first class to Osaka and then, and only then, may you propose to me at Super Nintendo World, and only then in front of the Mario Kart track."

I told her I'd even donate plasma to make that happen.

Besides the pedestrian specialty pizzas (meat lovers, veggie, three cheese), we have a secret menu. I talked Russ and Dee into creating it so people would not get bored from having the same kind of pizza. I came up with banana peppers, bacon, barbeque chicken, and barbeque sauce, calling it "b-lliteration." Anne Emily came up with Hershey's chocolate syrup, Nutella, sundried-tomatoes, olive-oil, gyro meat, and feta cheese, and called it "Freaks and Greeks." And people did like the secret menu, because you had to ask for it and promise not to take a picture of it and upload it on Google or Yelp. Our customers felt like it was *their* place, and some even offered up recipes. Never one to turn down an opportunity, Anne Emily said their recipe could be added if they donated a hundred bucks to the humane society.

One Saturday, after two dozen white nationalists paraded, literally paraded, through town waving the old Georgia flag (that featured the confederate stars and bars), they came in afterwards and ordered a bunch of food. We were ready for racists. Ignoring their order, we brought out what Anne Emily and I termed the “xenophobe special”; chorizo sausage, kimchi, and curry.

Dr. Dupern was the first one to pony up the hundred bucks. He’s not a medical doctor but a pastor. He comes on Monday nights to work on his sermons for the next Sunday. He’s always clean-shaven, and his cologne is so strong, that the pine scent breaks through the food smells that permeates our pizza palace. I asked him once why he wears cologne, and he explained the scent helps him focus on whatever task there was at hand. My mom says that his daughter is getting a divorce from some army recruit. “She’s not even older enough to drink,” added my mom.

George and Honey will never get a divorce, they even told me so. They’ve got five kids and said they wouldn’t be able to split baby Henry up. They come in on Tuesdays, because it’s “kids eat free night.” Even though there are five of them, they never eat that much and spend most of the time playing the claw game and trying to win SpongeBob plushies.

From time to time my mom will stop in after she gets done with her shift at the nursing home. She says that once I head off to college I’ll never live in Macon again.

I told her, “I think you say that because you hope that if you say it out loud it won’t come true.”

“I think you’re right,” she said. “I don’t think you’ll like paying for rent what they pay in Atlanta, much less Washington, D.C.”

“If Anne Emily needs to come back to take care of her grandmother or her parents, we’ll do that,” I said, as if it were a foregone conclusion.

“Hope you’re right,” she said.

Mom orders either calzones or pepperoni rolls, something that is portioned for a single person. My sisters are both in college so it’s just me and her at her apartment. After my dad divorced my mom, he tries to do something every weeknight, so he doesn’t have to go home to an empty apartment. He overexplained that Mondays are bowling league night, Tuesdays he gets his head shaved at the barbershop for nine bucks, pinball on Wednesdays, yes, I tell people, pinball leagues do exist. Thursdays, he plays cards. On random Sunday nights he will text me and we’d play basketball together at the elementary school playground. He tells me about what’s transpired so it will seem like he’s happy and fulfilled. Once I asked him why he left mom, and he said “a mid-life crisis.” When I asked him for specifics, he said it was only something you could understand if you went through it. “Like going through childbirth,” he explained. I wondered if he had gambled his entire 401K away on online poker but decided not to press him.

One Tuesday, the place was empty. It was just me and Anne Emily. Honey even called to say that one of the kids was sick, and they wouldn’t be coming in. Occasionally, we would take a pick-up order, but that stopped by eight. After that we just silently goofed off on our phones. Then I started kissing her neck and then she pulled back a little as if it tickled. My phone began to vibrate. I ignored it and so did she, and we resumed making out.

Then we both heard the chime from the door opening. It was dad. Because he shaved his head, people thought he looked like the “Mr. Clean” guy but with glasses and a longer jawline. He looked messed up. Dad wasn’t drunk but something wasn’t right. Maybe it was side effects from some prescription pills. I looked down at my phone, and it was a text from him saying he was going to come by.

“Hey there all-star, how’s the pizza empire?”

I waited a moment or two to speak to him. I tried to think of something clever to say. “Empire-rific, it’s good to see you.”

Then he noticed Anne Emily. “Hey, there she is, how’s the princess of Macon doing? How’s your family’s empire doing?”

“We’re doing okay,” she said, noncommittally. “Ready to go home.”

He sat himself in a booth. “What do I feel like tonight?” After a moment, he said to me, “Sport, can you get me a Mr. Pibb or a Mello Yello if you have it?” Dad rarely called me by my name, but his penchant for drinking soda that no one else drank seemed much stranger. I went to go get his drink from the fountain station, and when I returned he was talking to her.

“You ever here the story of how your boyfriend was conceived?”

She blushed.

I did, too. “Dad, stop it. Tell me what you want to eat.” I didn’t know where he was going. I had never heard this story and sure didn’t want either of us to hear it.

“It’s a funny story, full of irony and mystery.”

I upped the ante. “Dad, if you just change the subject, it’s on the house.”

The offer of free food would usually work on him, but he saw how mortified I was and couldn’t resist. He acted like a big kid sometimes, as if he was my big brother wanting to playfully tease me instead of teaching me how to change a tire or assemble a book case like normal dads did. “This is too good not to tell.”

I glared at him, getting angry.

“Fine, fine,” he said and pretended to scan the menu. “What did your mother order the last time she was here?”

I hesitated. I never wanted to tell him anything about mom. Like maybe he might skimp on the child support if he thought mom could eat out for dinner whenever she wanted.

“Are you trying to think of something smart to say?” he asked.

“He’s already smart,” said Anne Emily, coming to my rescue. “He got accepted into five colleges.” Then she added, “We’re both going to GSU.”

“Congrats to the both of you,” he said. “Be careful though. I hear most high-school couples break up their first semester of school.”

“Let’s go with a meat lover’s tonight.” And with that, Anne Emily and I went back to the kitchen.

For a while neither of us said anything while she watched me roll the dough.

“Are you making him a meat lover’s because you want him to die a little faster?”

“I never thought of that,” I said. “Maybe that’s just my subconscious.”

She walked away from the kitchen to spy on my dad and then came back to tell me that

“He’s doing something on his phone.”

I nodded. One time he stayed on his phone the entire time during my fifth-grade graduation ceremony. He even clapped while still looking at it. At the time I was mad, but now I’m just incredibly curious as to what could compel him to arrest his attention in such a way. Dad can’t recall what game app it was which makes it all the worse.

I started to add the sausage. Then I got an idea: I laid the sausage in a way so it looked it was a hand giving the middle finger. Since cheese would be on top of it, he would never see it. But I would know it, it would be my own private joke, but one that I could share with my girlfriend.

Dad walked up to the counter by the cash register where people paid their bill. He looked back and to the right and spotted us.

“Is it in the oven?” he asked.

“It is.” I said.

“Well, while we wait, let me finish my story. Take a seat.”

“We want to start cleaning up. Will it take long?” I asked.

“Listen, it’s about you, it’s important.”

I sighed so deeply I heard myself do it. Anne Emily decided to sit in a chair next to me.

“You’ve heard about 9/11 your whole life, but it doesn’t really mean that to you because you weren’t there that day. And that’s understandable. I don’t remember Vietnam.” He drank some more of his Mr. Pibb, chewed some of the ice, then spit the piece silently back into his cup. “No one knew what to do that day. People were, of course, scared, but it was all on the other side of the country. So in some ways it was just like any other tragic American event, except that it happened in the morning, and no one did any work the rest of the day. Everyone was just kind of stunned walking around. I was working in the meat department at Publix then. No one said a word to anyone else. Barely any customers came in, just people who needed diapers or a prescription. The manager ended up telling me to go home early so I clocked out. But I didn’t go home. I went to the bowling alley. I didn’t know what else to do. Not the new one, the old one going towards Bryon. It was just as silent as the grocery stores. Only one or two people were even playing. Your mom was still in nursing school, and they were having night classes.” He stopped talking and aimed his eyes at the ceiling. “Maybe there was some comfort in that repetitive motion of bowling, of just using one arm and the weight of the twelve-pound ball. And I was doing good that night, probably because my thoughts were not on aiming. And you know what I did? I bowled a three hundred that night on 9/11! I got my picture taken, and they put it in a frame. I felt so sheepish. I went back to Publix and bought some sparkling wine and two dozen roses for your mom, because the flowers were bogo. You never knew that until now. You were conceived on 9/11.”

I said nothing, I was trying to process what he said.

Anne Emily was doing the same.

My dad looked at me, hungry for my thoughts, my commentary on the revelation. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. I no sold my reaction and acted like he had told me tomorrow's weather forecast. I tried to be clever and sarcastic. All I could come up with was a meme I had seen online. "Cool story, bro. Tell it again," I said and then walked back to check on his pizza in the oven.

It still wasn't done.

Anne Emily joined me by the oven. "I'm sorry about that."

"Not your fault. Maybe he's on adderall or something."

"I think he's pretty sober, he's just weird."

"I think a lot of kids think their parents are weird," I said.

"You believe him?"

"Eh, who knows. Even if it's true, it doesn't change my life or my destiny or anything. I'm surprised he waited this long to tell me. Mom probably made him promise not to."

"True that," she said and reached for my hand and then squeezed my palm.

I'm a short guy, I'm five feet seven. She's taller than her parents and grandparents at five feet seven. We see eye to eye. "Go on home," she said. "I'll clean up and deal with him."

“I’m going to box up his pizza and tell him to leave or I’ll call the cops.”

I walked home.

A few days later, I went to the old bowling alley. It often floods, and the carpet smells like wet dirt, but it’s cheap to bowl there so the old timers still go there.

I saw the frame of my dad above the shoe exchange. There were eighteen other men in the same cheap bronze frame and two women as well. Dad had barely aged. He was wearing a gray t-shirt with a thin gold chain. He was smiling out of the right half of his mouth, and his head was tilted slight that way as well. His glasses needed to be adjusted. It looked like an eight-by-ten version of a driver’s license photo. I still couldn’t get over how he had barely aged in eighteen years. I must have been staring at the photo for longer than I had realized, because someone tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I worked there. I shook my head no and walked away. Spooked from the interruption, I forgot to take a picture of his picture with my phone to show Anne Emily.

I texted her when I got back in my car. I went over to her parents’ house, and we played Mario Kart together and talked about upcoming speech and public speaking homework, upcoming videogame releases, what dorms we wanted to visit at Georgia State University, everything and anything except my dad. But, finally, she couldn’t resist anymore and asked, “Was it real? Was there really a picture there of him?”

“Yeah, it had his name on it. Get this: below the photo was the date, like 9/11/01 and 300.”

She tried to make me feel by saying. “Well, hot take incoming, but that movie 300 sucks. Way overrated. Oh, and go ahead and put V for Vendetta in the trash as well. I think there would be a lot fewer racists if those movies was never released.”

I kissed her on the forehead and thanked her for saying so. I attempted a pun as bad as We Love Macon Pizza. “I can’t conceive of a better world.”