

Pizza ... and more

'They say it's the best pizza in town,' said my friend as we headed for Tony's. Tony is something of a legend around these parts. For 17 years he has operated the local pizzeria—with flair. Eating there is quite an experience. You get a hint of it from the moment you spot the 'Belmonte Pizza' sign, deliberately hung upside down (there's a story behind that). Then again as you peruse the creative pizza menu with the most intriguing names and toppings. Along with the classic meat-lover's variety, you will also find the 'Ankle-Biters' vegemite pizza, the one with lashings of peanut butter topped with banana, and the one named after his wife. There is an infectious warmth and good humour in this small, simply furnished, suburban restaurant. Little wonder that a young couple who first met there sent out their wedding invitations in the shape of a Belmonte pizza box. This is a pizzeria with a heart and soul: Tony.

Tony came to Australia from Lebanon as a small child. He has memories of being poor and at times hungry when his family did not have enough to eat. This, I am told, explains his generosity and sense of outreach. In the event of a community crisis, the local branch of the State Emergency Service know they can call on Tony's pizzas. As does the local Catholic parish in responding to people seeking charitable handouts. 'Send them

down to me,' says Tony. 'I'll give them all the pizza they can eat!' Tony is famous for feeding the wider parish too. When the after-Mass sausage sizzle ran out of sausages, Tony's pizzas were there in a flash.

Amidst all the paraphernalia on the walls of the pizzeria, photos of Tony's children take pride of place. This is one proud father, a devoted family man, and a believer who insists that if you teach your kids nothing else, 'Teach them the Our Father; it's a prayer they can hang on to when life gets tough.'

When a property developer offered Tony a handsome sum for his house, he turned it down. As far as Tony was concerned, his was a home no money could buy. 'The location is perfect for me. It's close to work. I can walk my children to school in the mornings. I can get home to my family quickly instead of being stuck in traffic.'

Tony's familial instinct extends to his customers. During family rush hour he might gather up all the children in the restaurant for an impromptu lesson in how to mix pizza dough. When, late one night, a young father who had just assisted at the birth of his first child ended up at Tony's in a tired and dazed state, Tony was ready with a complimentary pizza and a congratulatory word. All pregnant women dining in the restaurant receive the same special treatment.

When his son, Luke, was born on 4th November, Tony put a sign in the window of his pizzeria:

It's a boy! Luke 4.11. An over-zealous Christian mistook it as a bible reference—Luke 4:11—and Tony had to explain that the reference was to the birth date of his newborn son.

'Oh,' said the Christian. 'I thought it signified something—you know—profound.'

'Oh, but it does!' replied Tony.

A visit to Tony's is always a treat. More than a meal, it is an immersion in those values we all yearn to believe in: integrity, compassion, familial love, celebration of life, loyalty to one's local community, a bias for seeing the best in people. It is a reminder that, whatever our walk of life, we can positively impact on our community.

And yes, it's great pizza. •

