

Malaysia Buys Into New York Pizza, One Slice At A Time

 zesterdaily.com/world/malaysia-buying-pizza-concept-one-slice-time/

By Aida Ahmad

in: [World](#)



6.9.14 -

The shelf life of eateries in the posh Kuala Lumpur suburb of Bangsar, Malaysia, can be volatile. I have seen restaurants come and go all in the span of less than a year.

A few months ago, when I came across another new eatery in the area, I hardly gave it a thought. Soon after, though, a friend asked if I had been to this new place called [Mikey's Original New York Pizza](#). She assured me the place was worth checking out, and on her recommendation I did.

The pizzeria is the work of Michael Helfman, born and bred on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, who has brought New York-style, sliced pizza to [Malaysia](#). Until now, we have never had a restaurant that sells pizza by the slice, and many Malaysians are not used to the slice concept, let alone referring to a whole [pizza](#) as a “pie.”

Pizza shop is a slice of New York

“When you walk into Mikey’s, you are walking into New York,” said Helfman, who decided to adorn the interior’s brick-red walls with pictures of New York City, from the famous skyscrapers to the Wall Street bull to the New York Mets’ 1986 championship poster. And what New York pizza place would be complete without photos of the cast of “The Godfather” and “The Sopranos”?

“That is the environment I want to create. I miss New York, but now I love Malaysia, too,” said Helfman, who is looking forward to marrying his Malaysian fiancée, Gabrielle, in September.

About five years ago, Helfman arrived in Malaysia for work as a media consultant. When his contract was up, he stayed behind because he didn’t want to move. “Malaysia is going to be a permanent part of my life, so I figured I would bring a part of my life from the U.S. to Malaysia,” he said.

Having been to New York City myself not too long ago, I decided to partake in the nostalgia of the Big Apple with

Helfman. He has fond memories of eating his first pizza from a pizzeria called AJ's in Queens. "I don't know if it is still there or not, but pizza was always a big part of New York life. I mean, everywhere you go there is a pizzeria."

Most of the framed pictures on the walls were taken by Helfman and his fiancée. "If I see something that's cool, I take a picture. It's the age of smartphones, where you always have a camera in your pocket. You can capture those small moments that otherwise you won't remember. All of a sudden, I have 200 pictures of New York in my phone."

Helfman also has an important sidekick at Mikey's, chef Andrew Bellucci, the man who helped reopen the famous Lombardi's Pizza, which was the first licensed pizzeria in the United States.



Michael Helfman, owner of Mikey's Original New York Pizza in Malaysia, stands on front of wall of photos in the pizzeria. Credit: Aida Ahmad

Bellucci arrived in Malaysia in February, and describes the country in two words: "It's hot!" That also goes for the heat in the kitchen at Mikey's, where it's Bellucci's job to make sure the pizzas are flying out of the custom-fit oven, which reaches temperatures up to 752 degrees F (400 degrees Celsius). That's the ideal temperature to make good pizzas, Bellucci said.

“When you have a good crust, sauce and cheese, it’s good. The dough is key ... a soggy crust is not good. The bottom should be just a little charred. If you go to most of the pizzerias in New York, the gas ovens go up to only 550 degrees Fahrenheit, and that is not hot enough. Instead of eight minutes, it would take 13 or 14 minutes to cook, and the pie would be dry,” Bellucci said.

At Mikey’s, the menu includes Classic New York Pizza, the Meatball Pizza (also known as Mikey’s Favorite), the Tony Soprano and Pizza Bianco (Chef’s Favorite). A slice of the Classic is a minimalist’s favorite, consisting of cheese, sauce and dough. The Meatball Pizza is topped with roasted peppers, roasted garlic, cheese, sauce, a healthy sprinkling of Grana Padano cheese (all the pizzas here have this) and, of course, meatballs. The Tony Soprano is a meat-lover’s favorite, with pepperoni, steak, meatballs, roasted peppers, garlic, mozzarella and sauce, while Pizza Bianco is a four-cheese pizza with goat, ricotta, mozzarella and cheddar cheeses.

These were even better than the pizzas I had eaten in New York, I must say.

“I really missed slices of New York-style pizza, so we thought, ‘Why not just bring the concept here?’” Helfman said. “You can get a little bit of Mike at Mikey’s — my heritage and personality is reflected in the design and theme.”

Helfman is confident Malaysians are ready for pizza in slices. “It’s like at 3 p.m. ... You’re hungry, but you don’t want a full meal because you have dinner plans. You get a slice, and you’re done,” he said.

From a business standpoint, Helfman said he has been lucky. Mikey’s has been open for a couple of months, and people love it. Who doesn’t want high-quality pizza at an affordable price (the average price for a slice is RM12.40, or \$3.80 U.S.) prepared in a reasonable amount of time?

And if it’s not pizza but another slice of Americana that you crave, Mikey’s has more to offer: You can try the Waffle Fries, Boneless Buffalo Chicken Wings and “Hot Heroes” such as the Philly Cheesesteak. Everything at Mikey’s is homemade, even the sodas, which are made with fresh strawberry, pineapple and lemon.

It’s worth noting the rents of eateries in Bangsar are sky high, at about RM48 or \$14.85 U.S. per square foot. But Helfman is confident he’ll be able to make it, saying, “If you put out a good product, you’re good. Plus, we are on a great street.”

Main photo: Mikey’s Original New York Pizza owner Michael Helfman (left) and chef Andrew Bellucci at the pizzeria. Credit: Aida Ahmad

Zester Daily contributor **Aida Ahmad**, from Penang, Malaysia, works as a photojournalist at the largest circulation English news publication in the capital of Kuala Lumpur and is the 2012 Alfred Friendly Press Partners and Daniel Pearl Foundation Fellow. She spent five months working at the Los Angeles Times, where she contributed stories for the city, business and entertainment desks. She enjoys traveling, photography and creating food art that helps her gain more followers on Instagram.