



Jillyanna demonstrates the proper procedures to make a mouth-watering pizza, while Steve and his wife Carol get into the act.



## Passion for Pizza Dough Rises to a New Level at Jillyanna's Cooking School

*By Steve Hrehovcik*

One of the perks of being a freelance writer is assignments that introduce you to innovative ideas, creative people and picturesque places.

A recent visit to Jillyanna's Woodfired Cooking School in Kennebunkport proves this point. There, my wife Carol, who knows a thing or three about cooking, and I shared a remarkable experience creating several pizzas from scratch.

Tagging along to take photos and to make sure we got the details correct was *Tourist News* publisher and pizza lover, Judith Hansen.

It would be impossible to count the number of pizzas I have devoured over the years. I even pride myself in concocting a few pizzas of my own invention. So I'm thinking what's the big deal about a pizza school.

Well, the surprises begin even as we drive up to the home of Jill Strauss and her partner Valerie Glynn, site of the aforementioned cooking school at 141 Wildes District Road, Kennebunkport.

Strauss, who has adopted the professional name

Jillyanna – an Italian-inspired combination of her first and middle names, Jill and Ann, greets us. Not far behind is Glynn, who insists we view her nearby garden with tidy rows of young sprouting plants.

She singles out clusters of zucchini, peppers, lettuce, rosemary, chives and other delectable veggies that she promises will soon become key ingredients to pizza toppings. I'm thinking, "Yum, yum."

A short distance from the entrance to the house, Jillyanna points with considerable pride to what can only be described as an architectural marvel – a wood-fired brick oven that looks something like a miniature -cathedral. It seems an apt metaphor because the way Jillyanna refers to it has spiritual overtones.

I learn the oven is a modular Mugnaini wood-fired oven, artistically housed in a stone design by local masons Lenny Van Gaasbeek and Ben Cable.

Through the oven's arched opening a raging fire of about 900 degrees swirls around its cavernous dome in anticipation of some culinary event soon

to take place.

Jillyanna invites us inside her home/cooking school, and we don aprons in preparation for a "hands-on" lesson in pizza making – no, make that pizza creation.

Carol and I take a moment to appreciate the interior design of the oversized kitchen and dining area. A fireplace at the far end of the large room with a cathedral ceiling – more spirituality – adds a welcoming touch.

Through a wall of windows, we admire a well-cared-for expanse of lawn, shrub and trees that adds to the relaxed ambiance.

While we attempt to take in all this visual stimuli, Jillyanna explains the philosophy of her school.

"We want to introduce you to recipes and cooking techniques we've discovered so you can create your own Italian-inspired food," says Jillyanna. "You'll learn to make delicate, flavorful pizza crusts and experiment by adding toppings using a combination of fresh ingredients."

Although her explanations are friendly and detailed, with an outward

appearance of calmness, it's clear this lady has a fervent passion for what she does.

She describes how her love of food inspired her to travel to Verona and Naples, Italy, and to New York to study under master cooking teachers.

After a career in public education, radio journalism and working in restaurants throughout New England, she decided to open her own cooking school.

Glynn, who boasts being half-Italian and loves making family sauces and meatballs, also has had responsible positions in education. Together, they have 50 years of teaching experience.

With this background, it's easy to understand how the cooking school seemed inevitable.

Then, enough talk and observing. It's time for us to participate in the pizza creation process. Jillyanna presents us with several mounds of what she calls, "no-knead dough." She says, "I prepared this dough yesterday. It's made with regular flour, water, yeast and sea salt. It has to



Using a brick oven gives the pizza a special flavor, crisp toppings and a delicate crust.



‘rest’ for about 18 hours so the ingredients can blend with each other. Now it’s ready for you to stretch it.”

We go to a specially designed table with a smooth black marble top. She tosses some “magic” flour on the marble top, spreads it smooth and hands me the mound of no-knead dough.

It feels something like a pillow. “Flatten it,” she says, “but be gentle. You must seduce this dough so it responds to your caressing.”

My thoughts race for a moment but not to pizza. Carol sees my eyes glazing over and nudges me. In another moment, I’m back to spreading the pizza dough, smoothly, gently, caressingly, sensually. “It’s responding,” I say, as if I’ve just discovered the secret to gravity.

There it lays in a flat circle patiently waiting for me to add an assortment of toppings that Glynn has arranged on individual serving dishes. Carol and I confer. We choose a red

sauce and several cheeses, and we can’t resist some of Glynn’s meatballs. Carol defers to me to do the spreading.

Under the watchful eye of Jillyanna, I assemble the toppings into a pleasing, balanced arrangement. Jillyanna approves, slides a pizza paddle (which I am told is called a “peel” in culinary parlance) under the prepared pizza and slips it into an electric oven.

Jillyanna says, “This is a pizza you can cook in a home oven at 500 degrees for 25 minutes. But, remember, it does not have to be perfect. More important, you want to have fun and take pleasure in the process as well as enjoy eating the pizza when it’s ready.”

While this pizza is in the oven, Jillyanna brings out another mound of dough. This one uses a Neapolitan “0 0 Caputo” flour. She weighs it. Seven ounces is perfect. She hands it to me and says, “Stretch it. Pretend it’s Joan Rivers’ face.”

The ever-obedient student, using my knuckles, I stretch Joan Rivers’ face until she is ready to be smothered with toppings. Toppings applied, Jillyanna treats us to the moment we’ve waited for – a trip to the “cathedral” stone oven. She balances the flattened Joan Rivers and toppings on a peel and slips it into the blazing oven. Ninety seconds later: PIZZA!

Then Jillyanna introduces us to another dough recipe prepared in a food processor. By my count we experience three distinct pizza tastes using three different flours. We cooked one in an electric oven, another in the wood-fired stone oven and the third in a gas oven. Each hand crafted, each different, each delicious.

Three and a half hours later, having sampled several pizzas, salads and other treats we created and shared in friendly conversation over the dinner table, the class draws to a

delightful conclusion.

Since there were delicacies that we could not finish, we take several left-over samples with us.

On the ride home we recount the good cheer, laughs and a learning experience about food, its history and how to prepare and enjoy it.

Jillyanna offers classes Friday and Saturday from 4:30 to 7 PM and Sunday from 1 to 4:30 PM, plus private sessions. Classes are limited to eight people and focus on varied recipes. The fee is \$135 per person. Since Jillyanna’s does not have a liquor license, guests are invited to bring their own wine or beer if they wish.

More information is served up at [www.jillyannas.com](http://www.jillyannas.com) or call 207-967-4960.