



#### RESTAURANT NEWS & REVIEWS

## His pizza is so ‘extraordinary,’ the government granted him a U.S. visa

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It's not Renato Viola alone who claims his pizza is extraordinary. It's not just his wife, who came up with the name for his Mister O1 Extraordinary Pizza.

And it's not even the 200 customers a day who make reservations for one of 18 seats inside his South Beach pizzeria, tucked inside a gray office building where there's not even a sign out front.

No, Renato Viola can claim his pizza is extraordinary because the U.S government says so.

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Viola is in the country on what the U.S. government calls an O-1 visa — for “individuals with extraordinary ability or achievement” — hence the pizzeria’s name.

It’s a renewable visa for temporary workers similar to the EB-1 visa for immigrants with “extraordinary ability” that First Lady Melania Trump used to permanently move to the United States — a subject of some controversy last week.

But Viola’s proof is in his pizza.

“We had a dream and the United States gave us the ability to live this dream with this visa,” Viola, 37, said proudly in Italian-accented English. “Mister O1 is proof that with quality and hard work, you can have success.”



The famous Star Luca pizza at Mister O1 Extraordinary Pizza in Miami Beach. The small pizzeria became a huge hit despite being buried inside an office building with no sign out front. That has led to two other Mister O1 pizzerias, in Brickell and Wynwood in Miami.

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One look at his signature pizza shows it is anything but ordinary. His 13-inch pies are star-shaped with a pouch of ricotta cheese in each of the eight points — an innovation that other Italian *pizzaiolos* have since adopted.

The combinations of delectable flavors on his “special” pies, named after close friends and his first customers, are things that a typical corner pizzeria would never dare.

The Jacqueline has tomatoes, white truffle and eggs. The Fabio, Gorgonzola bleu cheese, mozzarella and speck. The Star Lucca, spicy salami as well as the cheese-filled peaks. And Coffee Paolo has Gorgonzola, mozzarella, local honey and spicy salami, and is dusted with fine-ground imported coffee. Yes, coffee. Extraordinary.

“It’s not traditional. It’s for the open mind,” he said.

## **Pizza ‘acrobatics’ called to him**

You might have called him an extraordinary child growing up if you didn’t call him weird. When his mother got up at 4 a.m. to make the daily ravioli and pizza dough for the family, Viola got up to help while his two siblings and father slept upstairs. He was 4.

One time, he ate only pizza for a week. His mother had to cut him off. Maybe he was more like an American boy, after all.

“You have to understand, an Italian mother is a chef. It’s our culture,” he said.

He started working at a local pizza shop in Agropoli, a tiny town near the Amalfi coast, when he was 11, sweeping floors — like something out of a period movie. He wasn’t allowed to even touch the dough until he was 14. When other kids’ parents were buying them their first scooters at 16, he was working three jobs over the summer at three different pizzerias, to buy an industrial-sized dough mixer that he kept in his parents’ basement.

He started taking weekend and summer classes across the country to learn how they made the pizzas from Naples to Milan.

His friends thought he had no shot when he entered a pizza-making competition in the northern province of Massa-Carrara, where they thought the judges would favor competitors from their own region. Instead, the southern boy won. He topped the pizza dough he has been developing since those days — fermented 72 to 96 hours — with porcini mushrooms, smoked buffalo mozzarella, mashed potato (!), rosemary and spicy salami. Someone must have thought it extraordinary.

“I still, to this day, can’t believe it,” he said.



Chef Renato Viola, co-owner of Mister O1 Extraordinary, works on creating a Star Luca pizza, a favorite at the Miami Beach pizzeria, on Tuesday, March 6, 2018. Viola was an award-winning pizza chef in Italy who gained entry into the United States under an O-1 visa for temporary workers, as an 'individual who possesses extraordinary ability.' He opened Mister O1 Extraordinary Pizza in Miami Beach, which became a huge hit despite being buried inside an office building with no sign out front. That has led to two other Mister O1 pizzerias, in Brickell and Wynwood in Miami, proving he was indeed an extraordinary pizza chef and entrepreneur.

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But making great-tasting pizza wasn't all that made him extraordinary. The way other young men watched and cheered for Gli Azzurri, the national soccer team, Viola was riveted by the kind of competition you would only expect to find in Italy: pizza acrobatics.

Pizza tossing is serious sport and a totally real thing I did not make up. (Don't believe me? Search YouTube.) Picture a martial arts nunchuck display but with pizza dough. Viola started competing around the country and eventually got the call-up to the big leagues: He joined the Italian national team and competed in Milan, Rome, Paris and Barcelona.

## Small-town chef, big-time fame

The rich flew him around the country to bake at private events. And when word got out that one unnamed patron contracted him to bake the most expensive pizza in the world, the international media caught wind.

He made a \$12,000 Louis XIII pie with eight types of cheeses, three kinds of caviar, jumbo Squilla Mantis shrimp and lobster flown in from Norway, finished with pink apricot Australian salt collected by hand from the Murray River. It comes paired with Remy Martin cognac, Champagne Krug Clos du Mesnil 1995 (cost: about \$1,000 a bottle), and it is cooked in your home.

Extraordinary enough?



Photos of Renato Viola, an award-winning pizza chef in Italy, hang on the wall of Mister O-1 in Miami Beach where he is chef and co-owner. Viola gained entry into the United States under an O-1 visa for temporary workers, as an "individual who possesses extraordinary ability." He opened Mister O1 Extraordinary Pizza on Miami Beach, which became a huge hit despite being buried inside an office building with no sign out front. That has led to two other Mister O1 pizzerias, in Brickell and Wynwood, proving he was indeed an extraordinary pizza chef and entrepreneur.

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He converted the basement of his parents' house into a test kitchen, and pizza chefs came from around the world to study under him. His Agropoli neighbors started showing up with their own pizza boxes for him to fill. He did. For free.

The mayor presented him with a key to the city.

Still, he wanted to try his skill in America — Miami in particular, a city he and his wife had known from vacations.

It was his immigration attorney who suggested in 2010 that he would be the perfect candidate for the O-1 visa. He would have to show “extraordinary ability by sustained national or international acclaim and must be coming temporarily to the United States to continue work in the area of extraordinary ability,” according to the U.S Department of Homeland Security website.

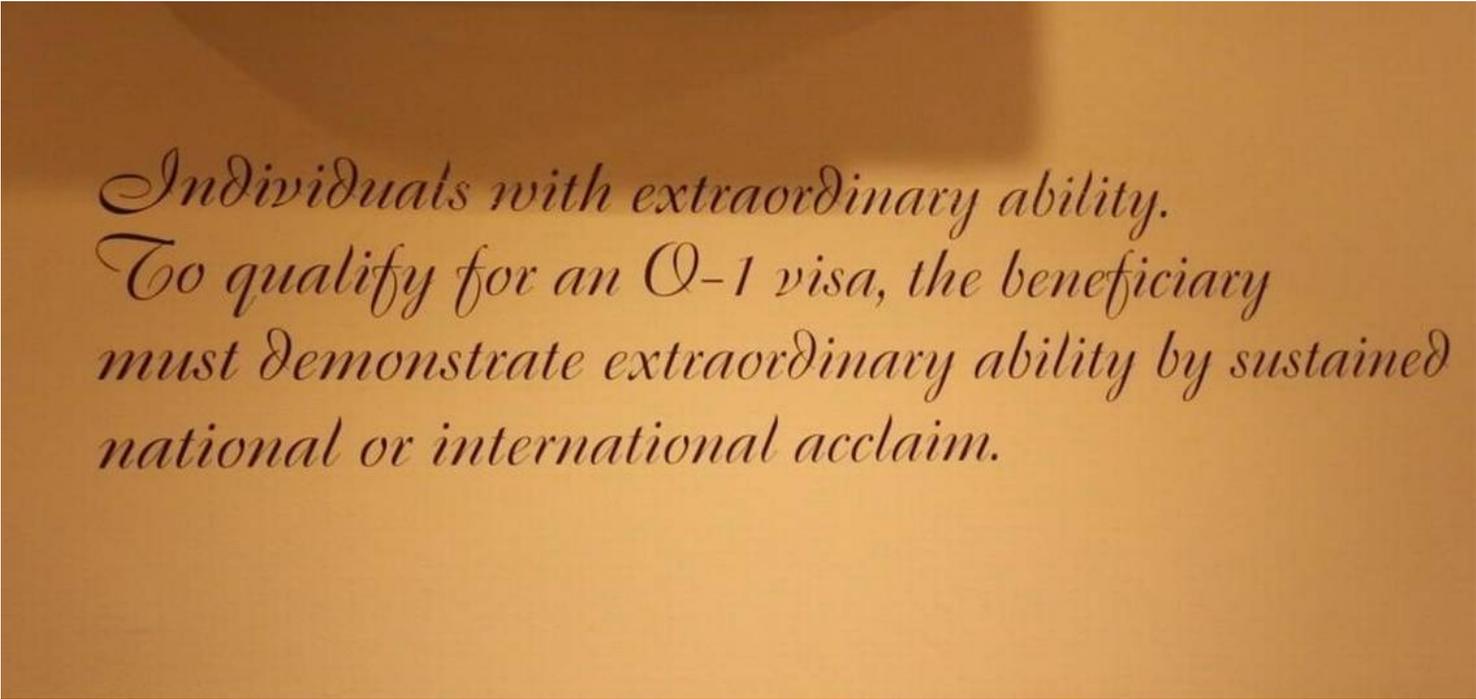
No, some lucky immigration agent didn't get bribed with extraordinary pizza. Yes, he did have to wait nearly a year for the government to review his application, which included his pizza acrobatics, cooking competitions, television appearances, the crazy-expensive pizza media buzz, the pizza school and his plan for opening a U.S. pizza restaurant.

“There's something extraordinary about him, the way he works, the way he thinks,” said his wife Manuela, who has known him since their teens. “He doesn't understand how different, how special he is from others.”

## **An 'extraordinary' pizza shop**

It was Manuela who suggested he name their pizzeria Visa O-1 Extraordinary Pizza — a great name for the first two years of their business until the credit card company Visa threatened them with an extraordinary lawsuit.

They changed their name to Mister O1, and now the U.S. State Department's description (in English and Italian) adorns the wall of their hidden pizzeria.

A photograph of a wall with a quote in cursive script. The text is written in a dark brown or black ink on a light-colored, possibly stone or concrete, wall. The quote is centered and reads: "Individuals with extraordinary ability. To qualify for an O-1 visa, the beneficiary must demonstrate extraordinary ability by sustained national or international acclaim."

*Individuals with extraordinary ability.  
To qualify for an O-1 visa, the beneficiary  
must demonstrate extraordinary ability by sustained  
national or international acclaim.*

A description of the U.S. O-1 visa is printed on the wall of chef and co-owner Renato Viola's Miami Beach pizzeria, Mister O-1.

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Viola came to the non-descript building near the corner of Michigan Avenue and 17<sup>th</sup> Street chasing cheap rent, and diners found them. So did Miami Herald food critics, who gave the restaurant three out of four stars (Very Good) in 2015. Mister O1 has opened two more locations, in trendy Mary Brickell Village and Wynwood, where he also runs a pizza-making school that's booked weeks in advance.

"I was in love with the speakeasy concept. He told me, 'You give a good, quality product, no matter where you are, people will find you,'" business partner Umberto Mascagni said.

It's the pizza speakeasy wedged between a few blocks of homes and busy Lincoln Road that even diners from Italy seek out.

"This is the best pizza in Miami," Gianfranco D'Isanto, a Naples, Italy, resident, says in Italian as his daughter, Alessandra, a languages professor at Miami Dade College, translates. She brings her parents to the pizza restaurant sometimes twice a week during their three-month vacation from Italy.

"We've tried every pizza and this is our favorite," his wife Daniela adds through her daughter.



Mister O1 chef and co-owner, Renato Viola, wishes customer Carla Dixon, far right, a happy birthday as she and her friends visit his restaurant in Miami Beach on Tuesday, March 6, 2018. Viola was an award-winning pizza chef in Italy who gained entry into the United States under an O-1 visa for temporary workers, as an 'individual who possesses extraordinary ability.'

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The front door barely stops swinging open. One minute it's another Italian couple, then the usual crop from nearby businesses. One is celebrating her birthday. Viola knows them by their previous order (a Fabio and a Bella Margherita).

"And get ready, because I'm coming back for my birthday in October," Nidia Gutierrez tells him.

Across the aisle, Viola is beaming. "You work for this moment," he whispers.

One day, he says, maybe the couple's 11-month old daughter will work here, too. He kisses his pinched fingertips — *muah!* — when he says her name, Grace. ("Our daughter is American and now we have to become American, too," Manuela says later.)

“Everybody has to know the American dream doesn’t exist without hard work,” he said. “If you work hard, you’re going to have your dream. And I’m living my dream right now.”

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## **MISTER O1 EXTRAORDINARY PIZZA**

680 Michigan Ave., Miami Beach

1000 S Miami Ave, Brickell

2315 N. Miami Ave., Wynwood



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