

# WASHINGTON BUSINESS



PHOTOS BY BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

**Mark Bergami prepares a white clam pizza at Haven Pizzeria Napoletana in Bethesda. The restaurant has two custom-built coal-fired ovens.**



# A love of pizza leads an accountant to toss some dough



## Value Added

THOMAS HEATH

One of my buddies recently suggested that I write a column about an accountant who invested a fortune in a pizzeria.

The idea reminded me of my obsession of a few years ago to

open up a hot dog stand. My wife headed off that mistake-in-the-making.

But I was hooked on the accountant's story. Here was another entrepreneur with too much money and not enough good ideas of what to do with it.

My appetite was heightened when I heard that he installed some specialized, super-duper pizza ovens. The tale gets even better: There are at least six pizza shops within, oh, 300 yards of his, and Washington is full of popular pizza places — 2Amys, Comet Ping Pong, Mia's, Matchbox and Pete's, to name just a few.

Then I got him on the phone.

Tiger Mullen, 56, is a self-described pizza nut, but he did not come to this idea lightly.

He approached it with the same mission-driven thoroughness that a private-equity dealmaker brings to a \$100 million decision to buy a company. For example, before opening his restaurant, Haven Pizzeria Napoletana, the Pittsburgh area native:

- Visited the Barnes & Noble at Tysons Corner and bought books on breadmaking, pizza making and brick-oven construction.

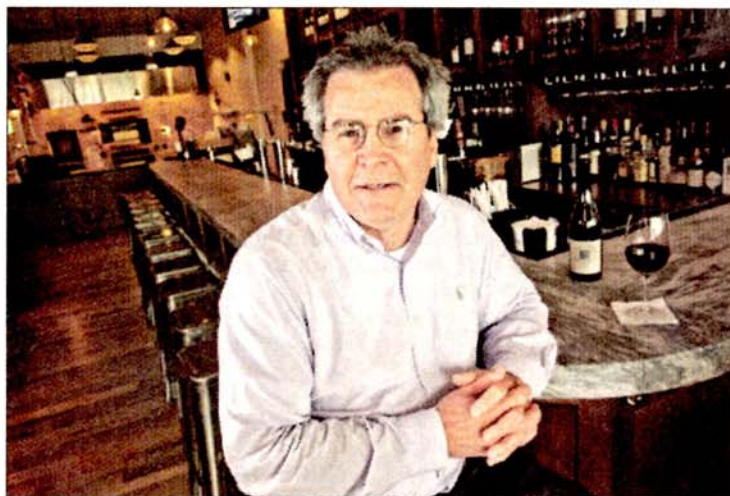
- Hit up the bakers at Whole Foods for a slice of fresh baker's yeast so he could make pizza dough. Then kept going back.

- Nearly burned down his house when he used his oven's cleaning cycle in pursuit of a higher temperature to bake his pizza.

- Found a Michigan inventor who built him a propane-fired portable oven that was shipped to Mullen in pieces via United Parcel Service.

- Hooked the portable oven up to a natural gas line in his house to bypass the propane.

- Baked homemade pizza six



In his day job, Tiger Mullen runs a boutique accounting practice, but his passion for pizza is what drew him to the restaurant business.

nights a week for 18 months as he hunted for the perfect recipe, experimenting with different doughs, flours, temperatures, yeasts and toppings.

- Tested his recipe during a seven-hour pizza marathon at a Christmas-break family reunion, baking 60 pizzas for about 60 people.

- Scouted 50 potential pizzeria locations throughout the Washington area with a commercial real estate broker before picking a former oriental rug store in Bethesda. The deciding factor: a rear entrance yards away from a Montgomery County parking lot.

- Walked the parking lot to count the spaces (326).

- Found two investors who bought a minority share.

- Interviewed 63 pizzaioli (pizza chefs) he found on Craigslist in Rhode Island, New Haven, Conn., and New York.

- Shelled out \$400,000 for two custom-made, 12-by-12 coal-fired Italian bread ovens that weigh 100,000 pounds each.

I concluded that this was no whimsical pursuit, and I was no longer surprised once he told me his background.

## An early self-starter

Mullen grew up in Oakmont, Pa., where his father was an investor in Pittsburgh area commercial real estate and several national businesses,

including Bryant & Stratton for-profit colleges.

One of seven children, Mullen started his own landscaping business when he was 11. As a teenager, he painted houses; by 16, he was the general manager of a local carwash.

Mullen graduated from George Washington University with a degree in accounting in 1979 and spent four years working for what is now Ernst & Young. He dabbled in the apparel industry before starting his own boutique accounting practice, specializing in real estate. He has about 30 clients, some of which are the biggest real estate players in the area.

His love affair with pizza began at age 4, when he started spending summers with his grandparents in Branford, Conn. A couple of times a week, the whole brood would troop over to New Haven for pizza at Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana.

"If you are going to do coal-oven pizza," he said, "that's the mecca."

Pizzeria Bianco in Phoenix and Arturo's on Houston Street in New York also had a big influence. But Mullen visited several dozen pizzerias as part of his research — and because he loves pizza.

The catalyst came in 2007, when visiting a brother in New York. They decided to drive two hours for a pilgrimage to Pepe's. Mullen couldn't get the pizza out

of his mind, and when he returned to Washington, he launched his project.

## Not as risky

I asked him why he invested in such a high-risk business as a restaurant — with a flock of competitors within spitting distance. Wouldn't it be smarter to leave your money in stocks, bonds or real estate?

The entrepreneur did his homework there, too. One of the biggest costs in the restaurant business is food spoilage, but because pizza has relatively few ingredients — most of which are easily preserved — it has high profit margins and is a safer bet than most other restaurants.

Haven Pizzeria Napoletana (he swears the name is not a rip-off of Pepe's) opened Feb. 15, after more than \$1 million invested by Mullen and his partners, including money for 18 special reinforced-steel beams to support the weight of the brick ovens.

The only advertising was a mailing to local residents.

Mullen said the business has a very small amount of debt, which means he put a ton of his own cash into it. His projections call for the business to pay back the investment over three years.

He wouldn't tell me how many pizzas he has served or the number of customers that have come through, but Haven is turning a small profit and, so far, is ahead of Mullen's projections.

The next step is to present a consistent quality of food and service, which should boost traffic and revenue. That, in turn, should boost profits.

The restaurant seats 160 and has spacious wooden booths that can fit a big family. The family thing appears to be working.

My wife and I visited on a recent Saturday early evening, and it was packed with families. The wait was 90 minutes.

We left. I wouldn't wait 90 minutes for a stock tip from Warren Buffett.

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The Washington Post  
**Food**

WEDNESDAY, MAY 9, 2012

**GOOD TO GO**  
**Dulce's**  
Empanadas sell like hot cakes at this new Fairfax shop. **E3**



**“ The pie emerges from the oven crisp of crust, bold with garlic and scattered with top neck clams that squirt hot juice. — Tom Sietsema's First Bite of Haven Pizzeria Napoletana. **E2****

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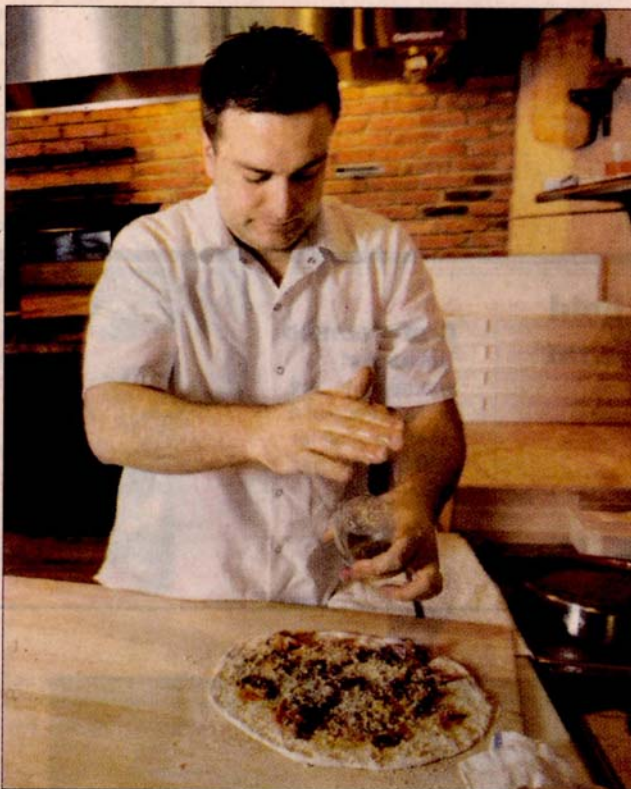
**NOURISH**  
**Crafty combo**  
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**E2 Restaurants**

EZ EE



PHOTOS BY BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

Pizzaiole Mark Bergami, top, prepares a white clam pizza at Haven Pizzeria in Bethesda. Above, the wine bar features oak reclaimed from the Maker's Mark distillery in Kentucky.

*Come for the clam pie,  
stay for the gelato*

**Tom Sietsema**

FIRST BITE

Like a lot of customers who have marveled over their meals at **Haven Pizzeria**

**Napoletana** in Bethesda, this admirer was curious to know the owners' source of inspiration.

Turns out there were many muses. Mark Bergami says he and his business partner, Tiger Mullen, kneaded bits and pieces of favorite pizza parlors (and even more-formal restaurants) into their creation. That explains Haven's two massive, coal-stoked ovens in the back of the dining room; a retro wine bar off to the side, paved with reclaimed oak from the Maker's Mark distillery in Loretto, Ky.; and gelato churned at the restaurant, from scratch, every day.

Bergami brings sterling credentials to the venue, which opened in February in a former rug store. The restaurateur is a native of New Haven, Conn., which enjoys a rich pizza culture. Before relocating to this market three years ago, Bergami also helped expand the legendary Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana there.

Long story short: Order a white clam pizza at Haven. The pie emerges from the oven crisp of crust, thoroughly cooked through, bold with garlic and scattered with top neck clams that squirt hot juice when you bite into them. Bergami says the seafood, from New Jersey and North

Carolina, is shucked "daily and continually." No dry or wizened clams here.

Almost as good is the basic tomato pie flavored with crushed imported plum tomatoes, pecorino cheese and olive oil: a handful of good toppings supported by a nicely grainy, pleasantly smoky crust.

The appetizers are straightforward, mostly salads. Red peppers roasted with mozzarella and fresh basil are still sizzling from their brush with fire when the first course lands on our broad wood table. The simplicity is intentional, Bergami says. Haven doesn't want you to fill up ahead of the signatures.

"Save room for the gelato," our sunny server advises at the start of the meal. Honestly, all I wanted after devouring that white clam pizza was another white clam pizza, but we did as we were told and got a couple scoops of Italian "ice cream." Suffice it to say, it took all my willpower not to make the dense pistachio gelato disappear.

Big chalkboards populate Haven's mozzarella-colored walls. One reads, "Work in progress." Such modesty is attractive. Young as it is, though, Haven already tastes like an authority on its subjects.

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7137 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda. 301-664-9412. [havenpizzeria.com](http://havenpizzeria.com) Pizzas, \$7 (10-inch) to \$28 (16-inch).



# CAPITAL BUSINESS



ASTRID RIECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**Once an accountant, Tiger Mullen now devotes his time to making rustic bread and artisanal pizza, undaunted by the Bethesda competition.**



# Mistakes may yield even better results when it comes to pizza



## Value Added

THOMAS HEATH

This is the second time I am writing about Haven Pizzeria Napoletana in two years. I am goofy on pizza, including Haven's, which is a short walk from my home. I like the owner, an accountant named

Tiger Mullen.

I got wind of Haven in the spring of 2012 from a friend who said, "Check out the accountant who is spending millions to open a pizza shop that is within a block of five other pizza places."

I decided to investigate, met Mullen, wrote about his obsession and, as a pizza lover myself, I became a regular customer.

But this story is not all about cheese, tomatoes, good vino and happy times. There is some burnt crust around the edges.

Mullen, by his own admission, muffed his initial foray into the pizza business with a romantic vision that was short on execution. Mired in debt, he sold the pizza business after less than a year. The new owners, who were former clients of his accounting practice and initial investors in the restaurant, ran it for a year. Then Mullen bought it back, and as of April 1, is once again a majority owner of the restaurant.

Got all that?

"There is really a good business angle to this," said Mullen, who is a successful accountant and hails from a family with a business background. "I really thought I could execute my vision through my management team, sitting in my remote [accounting] office at my desk.

"What I learned was that unless I

was in the dirt with sleeves rolled up, involved in every aspect, I could not create what I had envisioned."

Mullen's candor is refreshing.

His dream is to create an all-star, artisanal Italian pizzeria in downtown Bethesda, where there is plenty of competition for pies. It was spurred by his days as a kid, summering with his grandparents in Connecticut. They would take him to New Haven, where he developed a love for pizza at Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana. Mullen also wanted to replicate other pizza meccas, such as Pizzeria Bianco in Phoenix (one of my favorites).

He put some thought into the product; Mullen interviewed 63 pizza chefs before he found a guy he liked. He shelled out \$400,000 for two custom-made, 12-by-12 foot coal-fired Italian bread ovens that weighed so much he had to buttress the floor with steel beams.

But even the best products demand exact execution in the delivery. From the minute Mullen opened Haven on Feb. 15, 2012, he and his partners were in the hole. It took 18 months to get the required permits from Montgomery County building inspectors.

"During that time, I was paying full rent, insurance, utilities," Mullen said. "I had a manager and an assistant manager on the payrolls. We were way over budget."

Service at Haven was poor. Orders got lost or delayed. You could sit at the bar and not get noticed. He said he should have done more of the hiring himself, instead of delegating. The cost-controls on the bar, the kitchen and supplies were too loose, making it difficult to get a precise picture of the finances, Mullen said.

The ovens were a problem. One

would have been enough; the second oven went virtually unused. Even with one, spacious oven, orders were bungled for lack of coordination, mostly because of the different baking times required for different size pizzas.

Even with those mistakes, Mullen said the pizzeria made money on an operating basis. It was packed nearly every weekend, starting Thursday night. I know, I waited in line for a table.

"It was profitable," Mullen said. "We had a loss for tax purposes, but that was depreciation."

Even with the operating profits, the debt from the construction weighed heavily. By the fall of 2012, he had to ask the partners for more money to cover the debt — known as a cash call.

Two of Mullen's partners wanted to use the cash call to buy a majority share of the restaurant. Mullen reduced his interest in the business to 20 percent, surrendering control.

"I didn't want to be there and manage it and put in my blood, sweat and tears" without ownership control, Mullen said.

The new partners took over Jan. 1, 2013, less than a year after the pizzeria started.

The new owners went to work. The giant booths that Mullen had installed were reduced in size, creating more flexibility. A new manager, who had worked at a big restaurant chain, instilled business practices that kept a closer eye on inventories, particularly the all-important bar, where the big margins are made.

"That really tightened up controls and provided more accurate financial reporting," Mullen acknowledged.

As he watched the new owners take over, Mullen — with a

20 percent stake in the restaurant — pined to get back in control. So he sold his boutique accounting practice last year and bought out the two partners.

"I knew I could not implement my vision remaining behind the desk," he said.

Now he owns a majority of the restaurant with some other investors. The old partners are out.

This time around, Mullen is determined to implement his vision for an artisan pizzeria, serving ingredients such as imported San Marzano tomatoes, hand-pulled mozzarella cheese and fresh New England clams.

He is making everything from scratch in-house, from daily gelato to organic flours to fermenting dough for 48 hours to deepen the flavor. There is one-size pizza, an 11-inch Neapolitan, compared with the 10- and 16-inch choices.

Mullen has fired up the second oven for appetizers and breads. The rustic breads will be sold by the loaf and used in lunch sandwiches. They will also anchor a new breakfast menu including freshly squeezed juices, special pour-over coffee, and stations where customers can toast the bread and top it with imported cheeses, fruit preserves, or basics such as butter and cinnamon.

He even changed the wait staff uniforms and is renaming the business Pizzate Table.

Mullen has learned the concept of asset utilization, which means the restaurant — especially those ovens — needs to be serving all day long to bring in cash. He bought a couple of old trucks to rev up a catering operation, which will be known as Tomato Flyer Pizza Co.

One other thing: He is there nearly every day.

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