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# No Pizza for the Rookies

By ADITI KINKHABWALA

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J.—It was a few Fridays ago now, after the Giants' five-game win streak started but before this past weekend's NFC Championship trip to San Francisco. Veteran offensive lineman David Diehl spied rookie Da'Rel Scott reaching for a slice of pizza in the Giants equipment room.

Diehl asked Scott what he thought he was doing, Scott shot his hands up and then he said, "Wait, I always eat this." Diehl's response? "We've been winning," Scott said, "so he let me stay."



William Hauser

Umberto Corteo delivers a slice to Brandon Jacobs on pizza Friday.

For five seasons now, Fridays are pizza Fridays in the Giants equipment room, courtesy of Rich Salgado and Umberto's Pizzeria and Restaurant on Long Island. It's good pizza. It's tradition. And it requires a little policing.

"You can't just let the rookies come in and have them feel completely comfortable," right guard Chris Snee said with a sneer Thursday. "There's got to be some benefit to being an older guy. They have the benefit of fresh legs. We're sore. What's a little pizza? Can we at least have that?"

Well, sure. But that's only half of it. A native of Long Island, Salgado started eating Umberto Corteo's pizza as a 9-year old. He's now founder and CEO of Coastal Advisors LLC, from where he provides all kinds of insurance to more than 300 professional

athletes. He's a former University of Maryland lineman, too (hence the slice for Scott, a fellow Terp) and as much friend as insurer, he began taking Giants great Michael Strahan out to Umberto's in New Hyde Park years ago.

The way Salgado tells it, Strahan loved the pizza so much that Salgado decided back in 2007 he ought to bring it to the facility on Fridays for the equipment staff. "They're the hardest-working guys in football and the most underappreciated," he says.

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The Giants offensive linemen, then almost all clients of Salgado and whose lockers were closest to the equipment room, starting helping themselves, too. Soon, a custom was born. Invitations are discreet,

linemen are welcome and, well, Diehl is the gatekeeper.

"If you weren't in on the pizza earlier in the year, you technically aren't allowed in there," backup lineman Jim Cordle said. Technically? "I won't name names but yeah, I've seen people rush in, get a piece before Diehl sees them." (Cough, assistant offensive line coach Jack Bicknell, cough.)

Second-year lineman Mitch Petrus looks around the room before admitting, "Yeah, I've snuck a piece," and when left guard Kevin Boothe says no, he doesn't eat the pizza, it doesn't sound wholly by choice.

"Those guys work out late. I work out in the morning, so I don't stick around for the pizza. And I can't switch it up," he says. "Not now."

Corteo left his family's village outside Naples for Brooklyn as a teenager. He settled into work as a dishwasher at a pizzeria when, as the family lore goes, a regular pointed at him and said, "That man is always working so hard, I want him to make my pizza." He did, and a handful of years later he and his brother opened a little pizza place in New Hyde Park, less shop than "a hole in the wall with a window that had a glass that slid up and where slices were served outside," Corteo's son, Gaetano, said.

Today, Gaetano is general manager of a grand, two-story full-scale dining room and banquet hall. Umberto's grew in stages in the 1980s, it began hosting weddings in the 1990s and the now 68-year-old Umberto still makes the restaurant's dough every morning. The Friday pizza runs to New Jersey, though, are the 34-year old Gaetano's dominion. He starts making the 15 pies at 10:45 a.m., Salgado comes to get him around 11:30 a.m. and an hour later, they're in the equipment room, pizza still hot.

Second-year defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul was allowed a slice once—he drove out to New Hyde Park two weeks ago with defensive tackle Linval Joseph. Giants co-owner Steve Tisch has eaten out there, end Justin Tuck and his family are regulars and yet for as much new business as these mini pizza parties have net and for as good as the pies are ("amazing," the rookie Scott said), there's definitely something more at play here. Namely, superstition.

"I stick to the buffalo chicken," center David Baas said. "If there's no buffalo chicken, but there's something that looks like the buffalo chicken, then it's OK."

Whatever it is, it's worked the last five weeks, as the once left-for-dead Giants are now headed to the Super Bowl and a date with the New England Patriots. They fly to Indianapolis on Monday. Of course, that doesn't mean next Friday is not a pizza Friday. Umberto's ships pizzas around the country, cooking them  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through, freezing and vacuum-packing them, and the Corteos are planning to send a stash of pies that way to Indianapolis by priority mail next week. Of course, Gaetano has spent enough time around Diehl, he's thinking he might try to hop a flight and bring the pizzas himself. If the TSA clears it.

"I don't want David mad at me," he said. "I don't stand a chance against him—I'm just 5-10."

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