

# FLAVOR

## & THE MENU

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FLAVOR TRENDS, STRATEGIES & SOLUTIONS FOR MENU DEVELOPMENT



Better-For-You **TRENDS**

**PIZZA:** Flour to Flame

Flavor  
**BEHAVIOR**

# From FLOUR to FLAME

Neo meets classic in today's artisan pizzas

BY ROBIN SCHEMPP

If ever there were a food that is the product of its parts, it must be pizza. With its essential bread dough crust, it needs little more than a tasty sauce, a few embellishments and a basic bake to make it anytime, anyplace craveable. Although the casual dining trend has relaxed more precious menu offerings, it has had the opposite effect of elevating once carefree foods like pizza for a more discerning diner.

Now, old-fashioned craft and ingredients are an important part of the new recipe. Like the advent of the better burger and the gourmet dog, we now have the artisanal pizza. Defining artisan is a tough proposition, however, with a food as elemental as pizza. The artisans themselves most often describe it as a culmination of quality ingredients, skillful dough development, great oven and bake method—a cross between tradition and ingenuity and careful research. Here we share the clues and cues of key pizza players.

## DOUGHS AND DON'TS

The seemingly simple flour+water+leavening formula is not at all straightforward, but rather a lot of R&D and complex decisions made with each batch. Clay Westbrook, president of the growing multi-unit Vt.-based American Flatbread restaurants, sums up the particulars of doing it right in three categories:



- 1) **THE INGREDIENTS:** “Deep well water or high-quality filtered water, finely milled flour with premium protein and ash content scores.”
- 2) **THE TECHNIQUE:** “Mixing process, hydration rate, hand-working each batch, fermentation followed by long and slow retardation to develop acetic acids and characteristics such as irregular hole structure of crumb and proper Maillard reaction of crust [as with French bread] and stretching dough by hand.”
- 3) **THE BAKING:** “In our case, the properties of our particularly designed wood-fired oven contribute to ideal heat conduction—convection-luminary permutation and skill of the baker maintain proper balance.”

### FLOUR POWER

The flour called “00” (a.k.a. doppio zero) and specifically that made by authentic Italian miller Caputo is the gold standard of pizza flours. Unlike North American criteria for judging flour via protein and gluten or hard and soft wheat, Euro/Italian flours are classified according to mill or how finely they are ground (00 is second to finest). Made specifically for pizza and pasta applications, the lower grind reduces water absorption and eases in working the dough, while Caputo’s careful mix of soft wheat keeps the protein at what many consider the ideal 12.5 percent.

With a bit of experimentation and tinkering, it is certainly possible to produce a

commendable, open, airy, crust and both crackle and chew with most any consistent flour source, but it is not typically as consistent or precise. All gold standards have their followers, so in recent years several international and domestic sources have attempted to replicate Caputo’s 00 flour—though the jury will be eternally out on their success. Regardless, “00” is essential for traditional Neapolitan pizza, but not every operation or style calls for that.

For example, American Flatbread uses an organic American-Canadian flour blend essentially milled at 00 but with less-refined wheat germ that increases nutritional value and contributes unique texture, crumb and flavor. In contrast, Mark Allen, executive chef/culinary director of Boston’s Towne Stove & Spirits, takes seriously the hand-crafted qualities of his housemade flatbread dough that employs old-school ingredients, including 00 flours from Italy and his three-year-old starter. He tops them with less traditional yet artisanal combinations such as: lobster, black truffle mascarpone, shiitake mushrooms and leek; steak and cheese with arugula salad; and lemon or barbecue chicken with caramelized onion, Keen’s cheddar and aioli.

#### *Culinary Cue:*

John Rao, co-owner of Pizzeria Verita in Burlington, Vt., spent more than five years perfecting his formula and technique for pizza dough before opening the restaurant. Staying true to the Neapolitan recipe, he uses Antimo Caputo flour imported from Italy to yield a traditional crust with air and lightness but enough heft to hold up to classic San Marzano sauce, housemade and locally sourced cheeses, and farm-fresh seasonal and traditional Italian combinations—baked in an Italian wood-fired oven.

An emphasis on flours and fermentation as well as local and seasonal toppings give distinction to pizzas at Cambridge, Mass.-based Area Four/A4 concepts.



### RISE AND REST

Regardless of the starter or leavening method, accurate and attentive fermentation, rising and resting are key components for any crust quality. Even for multi-unit locations that



don't make dough from scratch, it is worth the research for a consistent, quality result. Properly proofed dough yields a crust with volume, even grain, white crumb, golden-brown surface and full-bodied yeasty flavor that bakes consistently and without cracking.

Cape Cod's Pain D'Avignon, in Hyannis, Mass., mixes old-world techniques with new-world originality, combining classic ingredients from its adjacent European bakery but then topping its flatbreads with locally farmed and seasonally dictated ingredients before grilling them. Executive Chef Matthew Tropeano explains the process: "Our doughs develop flavor and texture with a natural process of fermentation and retarding. Even though we have mixers that mix the dough—which helps maintain the air and moisture in the dough—everything is still cut and shaped by hand, making this dough the perfect base for grilled flatbreads."



WISCONSIN MILK MARKETING BOARD

Today's pizza artisans are paying much more attention to the crust, technique and toppings, resulting in culinary pies like this zucchini and rosemary version with blue cheese crumbles.

### Culinary Cue:

Cambridge, Mass., pizza mecca Area Four settled on a thin but high-flavored crust with Neapolitan leanings. Specialty blended flours, a 10-year-old sourdough starter and 24 to 30 hours of fermentation give the pizza distinction. It's capped with housemade sauce and cheese as well as traditional, local and sustainable toppings that run the gamut from old-style Marinara and Margherita to local favorites like Wellfleet Cherrystone Clam and Bacon with farm-fresh and locally produced toppings like sweet corn and basil.

### TOP IT ALL OFF

Schools of thought on adorning pizza vary as much as pizza styles and variations. Purist pies have prescribed recipes that are all about reaching the right balance. Similarly, a school of minimalists value their bread or crust such that they want it to be the predominant experience, neither weighing it down (literally) nor overwhelming its delicate flavor. This often dictates topping minimums or specifically assembled combo menus (no substitutions!).

More commonly—and these days more likely the money move—is in offering a superlative base bread as well as classic, and contemporary caps and combos, which range from sauce to herbs and everything in between.

### GET SAUCEY

The sauce on the pie is anything but superfluous, and though often the least expensive, overlooked component of the finished pie, the sauce—and where, when and how much is applied—is a matter of both great debate and differentiation.

The standard bearer is the red sauce made only with certified San Marzano tomatoes. Regardless, the growing trend is to communicate your supply whether it's the traditional Italian cradle, a local or organic farm or cooperative, or even a "secret" source. The pizza-eating public expects operators to be attentive to the origin regardless of whether it's the chef's recipe or a supplied product.



Meanwhile, the other colors in the Italian flag are ever-more represented: White pizzas are now often made with a fresh cheese rather than the characteristic white or béchamel or less traditional cheese sauce, while green entries come with pesto well beyond basil and include everything from cress or arugula to green garlic.

And lest we forget the sauceless flatbreads, which can be every bit as satisfying as the sauced variety. A drizzle of the best olive oil and sprinkle of good salt and maybe a select few pre- or post-bake toppings is all they need. The time-honored Pizza Bianca (not to be confused with white-sauced pizza) is just that, while lesser known but up-and-coming Pizza di Sfrigole, with its lard-based dough studded with lardo or pork bits (sfrigole), clearly has no need for sauce.

#### Culinary Cue:

**PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM:** Clay oven-roasted sweet red peppers, Kalamata olives, Vermont Butter & Cheese chèvre, fresh rosemary, organic red onions, whole-milk mozzarella, Blythedale Farm's Cooksville Grana and Grana Padano — *American Flatbread*, multiple locations

**THE GALACTIC:** Homemade hemp pesto sauce, mozzarella cheese, organic button mushrooms, garlic, organic Roma tomatoes and oregano — *Galactic Pizza*, Minneapolis

#### CHEESE IT

Though crust and sauce are critical to great pizza, cheese-loving Americans often define a great pie by the variety, quality and sometimes even quantity of cheese. Of the world's 400-plus classifications of cheese, fewer than a dozen are commonly found on pizza. A predominance of that is mozzarella followed by other Italian varieties like provolone, Parmesan and Romano—and to a lesser though ever-increasing degree, Asiago, Fontina, ricotta, Gorgonzola and burrata.

Meanwhile, goat, cheddar, Jack, blue, Muenster, Gouda, Gruyère and American originals often top the list of non-Italian pizza

cheeses, though they often find an Italian blending counterpart in mozzarella or provolone. Progressive pies often highlight the cheese or, increasingly, the blend of specialty cheeses.

Cheese is generally classified according to tradition; aging and region of origin are among the most important. While tradition (and some DOP regulation) holds that varieties may only come from their place of origin, domestic production of the major pizza toppers has advantages in distribution time, quality and cost, unless it is long-aged exclusive cheese, for example Parmigiano-Reggiano. As much as the traditionally sourced cheeses mark a great classic pizza, local, specially contracted or even housemade cheeses prevail on the progressive pies of independents and are gradually growing in multi-units as a point of differentiation.

#### Culinary Cue:

**MGFD BACON PIZZA:** Caramelized onion, potato, cave-aged Gruyère and arugula — *Harry's Pizzeria*, Miami

**FUNGI MISTI:** Fontina, Taleggio and thyme — *Pizzeria Mozza*, Los Angeles-based

#### PROTEIN PLUS

The carnivorous pizza effete expect artisan pies to include carefully sourced or housemade cured meat. Branching into pork-centric charcuterie well beyond the classics is big, but it doesn't end at the pig. Meat, game and plenty of poultry are being hatched onto today's upper crusts in the form of value-added braised (short ribs), confit (duck), roasted (lamb) and, on the heels of most other causal categories, a profusion of farm-fresh eggs.

Similarly, while old-style seafood toppings were once limited to anchovies and sometimes clams, modern and regionally sourced interpretations now abound from local shores and specialty sources. Those can include anything from rock shrimp and halibut cheeks to house-cured sardines or brined white anchovies lain atop red, white or green pies, with and without cheese.



BRIAN SAMUELS

At Pain D'Avignon, chef Matthew Tropeano enhances the flavor and texture of his dough by hand-cutting and hand-shaping, "making this dough the perfect base for grilled flatbreads," he says.

Finer cured meats and seafood that do not hold up to high heat are often added to pies post-baking, which contributes a nice hot and cold contrast.

*Culinary Cue:*

**THE PIGGY:** Thick brioche crust piled high with fine charcuterie including pepperoni, bacon and prosciutto — *Pig Ate My Pizza, Robbinsdale, Minn.*

**CRAB PIE:** 100 percent backfin crab meat; blend of hand-grated mozzarella and imported Reggiano cheeses topped with caramelized onions and Old Bay Seasoning — *Matthew's Pizza, Baltimore*

**VEGGIES WITH VALUE**

It's no surprise that produce-adorned pizzas have been expanding in breadth and depth, giving both meat and meatless compositions greater prominence on menus. Vegetarians have long sought pizza to fill the gaps, but veggie-topped flatbreads have now become a main attraction.

Vegetables that once seemed destined only for the dinner plate or salad bowl are finding their way onto pies. While this trend is led by vegetables, less traditional toppings also include sea vegetables, legumes, fruits, varietal potatoes and grains:

**ROASTED, BRAISED AND CHARRED:** From roasted beets to braised endive to charred corn or broccoli, "value added" vegetables we thought we'd never see atop a pizza are now the crowning jewels.

**BITTER, DARK AND SPICY GREENS:** Arugula added to a pizza (usually post-bake) is a classic Italian prep, but rabe, cress, mustard greens, collards, parsley and especially kale are all on-trend embellishments.

**SALADS:** Red, white and green knife-and-fork versions (both Sicilian and Neapolitan

styles) topped with fresh (uncooked), dressed or dry salads and/or veggies are a new opportunity to include produce.

**SEA VEGETABLES:** Nutritious and delicious sea vegetables, from fresh wakame to smoked dulse, take a cue from popular seafood pizza and pasta dishes.

**LEGUMES:** Be it fresh peas, baked cranberry beans, braised favas, white bean purée or a sprinkling of lentils, legumes are a terrific way to add sustenance to flatbreads.

**FRUIT:** Roasted, fresh and dried fruit add sweet-tart interest to savory or sweet pizzas and are especially good with those trending spicy greens, fresh cheeses and vinegar drizzles.

*Culinary Cue:*

**BRUSSELS SPROUTS PIZZA:** Béchamel, mozzarella, lemon, lardo — *Pastaria, St. Louis, Mo.*

**RUSTICA SALAD PIZZA:** White or whole-wheat Rustica pie with mixed greens, Kalamata olives, red onion, hard-boiled egg, corn, fresh diced tomatoes, Parmesan cheese and creamy dressing with or without roasted chicken — *Pizza Rustica, Miami-based*

**PIE AS PLATE**

Finally, pizza slingers embrace a hybrid of styles, making methods and toppings that are both classic and creative. A menu of signature pies and seasonally driven selections gives guests the best of the best, while a discrete list of mix-and-match builds allows more selective patrons to choose rather than substitute. When coming up with a list, it can be advantageous to look at the options as a menu, allowing both traditional and nontraditional selections. Similarly, looking at those signature pies as a plate with components each contributing to the final flavor leads to an optimal pizza experience. ☺

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