



# Pizza! Pizza!

Bakers and consultants are reinvigorating the pandemic- and recession-proof favorite with new dough innovations, plant-based options and more.

**Liz Barrett Foster**



**P**izza and its varied crusts are currently going through a transitional phase. While some pizza doughs have gotten thicker and more comforting, others have slimmed down or boosted their nutritional value. Factors such as a renewed interest in health and pizza's deliverability are affecting the change. Here, with the help of several pizza experts and chefs, we'll look at a few of the ways pizza crusts are trending and innovating.

## The Pandemic Effect

Pizza has always been one of America's favorite foods.

Suddenly, pizza's deliverability and customization became more important starting in 2020. The change resulted in a noticeable shift in consumer tastes. Not only were people trying different styles of pizza, but they wanted the quality of those pizzas to be on point.

"The pandemic was both a catalyst and an accelerant for guest choices in dough," says **John Arena** (pictured above), co-owner of Metro Pizza in Las Vegas. "The industry was already moving toward a takeout model, and the need for takeout-friendly dough that would maintain its integrity from oven to consumer became more crucial. Even some diehard Neapolitan-style pizza makers began modifying dough formulas to create travel-friendly products."

Consumer orders of pizza increased from one pizza per week to two or three per week during the pandemic, according to **Chef Tony Gemignani**, a 13-time World Pizza Champion and owner of several pizza concepts including Slice House and Tony's Pizza Napoletana in San Francisco and Pizza Rock in Las Vegas. "If you had options on a menu during COVID, you did well because people wanted options," Chef Gemignani says. "When customers ordered more, they tried new types of pizza. Suddenly, they started buying the Detroit's, trying the grandmas,



Peter Reinhart, a baker, educator, pizza dough consultant and author of 13 books on bread (credit: Peter Taylor).

going to that guy that did Sicilians. Those pizzas started to become somebody's favorite."

**Peter Reinhart**, a baker, educator, pizza dough consultant and author of 13 books on bread and pizza believes Neapolitan "is phenomenal when it's done right. New York-style is phenomenal when it's done right," he says. "Those styles are not going away, but people are also always on the search for something new and different."

## Thicker and Airier

The rise in delivery orders resulted in a demand for pizzas to stay hotter longer and reheat easier. Neapolitan pizzas, best enjoyed fresh out of the oven on-site, often took a backseat to thicker pizzas such as Detroit-style and Sicilian. Not only do thicker pizzas stay hotter during transport, but they tend to be easier for consumers to reheat the next day.

Regional styles, which have been growing in popularity for several years, continue to gain traction, with Pizza Hut U.S.'s chief brand officer, **David Graves**, telling CNBC in 2021 that Detroit-style pizza is the fastest growing trend in pizza.

"Pizza makers have become absolutely obsessed with pushing the limits of hydration," says Santa Monica, California-based pizza consultant **Noel Brohner**. "As dough takes on more water, the pizza becomes lighter and airier with a more open crumb."

**Michael Kalanty** is an independent R&D contractor and author of "How to Bake Bread: The Five Families of Bread." He worked with Delfina Restaurant in San Francisco to create a light-and-airy focaccia table bread that the restaurant used as a base for pizzas and sandwiches that were sold out of a walk-up window while the restaurant was redesigned this summer. "We're turning it into pizza al metro presentations," says Kalanty, referencing an oblong-shaped pizza that can be as long in length (pizza by the meter) as desired, "topping it with guanciale, broccolini and red peppers and toasting it." Because of its ease of transport, Kalanty says he can imagine the pizza al metro style working in places that cater to a mobile crowd, such as airports.

## Quick-Proof Dough

It's normal for pizza dough to take two to five days to rise, right? However, in today's fast-paced "need-it-yesterday" environment with shrinking kitchens, smaller staffs and less



From top: A lox and bagel pizza by California-based pizza consultant Noel Brohner (credit: Pizza Quest); Brohner at his home; Michael Kalanty, an independent R&D contractor and author experiments with a light-and-airy focaccia as the base for pizzas.



room for refrigeration, many pizza makers don't have time to wait. Enter the four-hour ferment.

Chef Gemignani says that when he first heard about a four-hour dough ferment that pizza and bakery consultant **Tiziano Casillo** was using, it went against everything he had been trained to do. "Long fermentation was always considered better," Chef Gemignani says. "Yeast feeds on simple sugar. Your dough is lighter and airier. The longer you mature it, the more flavor and texture it will have."

However, when Chef Gemignani tried the four-hour dough, he says, he was amazed. "I took a team to Bergamo, Italy, in 2018, to meet Casillo and his collaborator and translator Oxana Bokta, where they were working on the four-hour dough called scrocchiarella, which means 'crunchy' in Italian," he says. Now, Chef Gemignani has been introducing the concept to fellow pizza makers who may be limited on space and/or are making focaccias, paninis, Roman-style pizza or any other chef-driven artisan-style pizza in their operation.

So what's the magic? How does it ferment in four hours? Chef Gemignani says the flour is the key. "There's a natural sourdough starter in the flour, helping it to pre-ferment," he says.

Advanced fermentation techniques are just another way pizza makers are improving flavor, texture, aroma and even shelf life, according to Brohner. "Sometimes this means a longer ferment, while in other cases pizza makers are exploring pre-ferments like sourdough, poolish and biga," he says.

## Healthier Pizza Dough

Some pizza makers are experimenting with "healthier" pizza options, such as those with crusts that are gluten-free or made with whole-grains, low-carb/high-protein blends and even plants (aka cauliflower). Consumers are increasingly interested in natural and organic ingredients in pizza, too. In fact, 64% of consumers seek out foods made with clean ingredients, according to "Consumer Perspectives on Food Ingredients," a survey of more than 1,000 consumers conducted by the International Food Information Council in May 2021.

Just like the growing list of functional beverages that target gut health, some pizza is getting the functional treatment. Prebiotic and probiotic pizza flour is an emerging trend, according to Kalanty. "Prebiotics and other functional additives are getting good reception in indulgent categories like pizza," he says.

Gluten-free pizza shows no signs of slowing down either. At Tony's Pizza Napoletana in San Francisco, Chef Gemignani says the pizzeria sells hundreds of gluten-free pizzas per week. "Vegan is not quite as popular as gluten-free, but it's on its way," he says. "The vegan world is making a move, with new pizza toppings like cup-and-char pepperoni. At the same time,



Above: Chef Tony Gemignani shows off one of his award-winning pizzas at his restaurant, Tony's Pizza Napoletana in San Francisco (credit: Sarah Inloes); Below: Various pies by award-winning Chef Tony Gemignani (credit: Sarah Inloes).

everyone's also looking for ancient grains, simplified grains, naturally leavened doughs and sourdoughs."

For pizzerias wanting to mimic what's happening in retail with vegetable-forward crusts such as yeast-free and wheat-free cauliflower, Reinhart says that pizzerias can offer the crust to further differentiate themselves, especially if they'd like to be popular within the vegan or vegetarian communities. "Pizzerias can make plant-based or gluten-free crusts ahead of time and freeze them," he says. "This way it doesn't interfere with the production flow."

Yeast-intolerant pizza lovers may want to keep up with researchers from the University of Naples Federico II as they experiment with leavening pizza dough without yeast. As documented in the journal "Physics of Fluids," a team of researchers has found that by placing prepared dough in a hot autoclave designed to raise temperature and pressure, gas can then be dissolved into the dough, making bubbles form as pressure is released during baking.

## The Local Angle

Consumer interest in locally sourced foods continues to grow, with concerns about cost and a desire to know where food comes from. Reinhart says he's seen the effects, with more house-milled, locally milled or regionally grown flour used for pizza dough lately. "If [the flour] is not 100% local, then it is at least partially," he says. "Ancient grains and perceived healthier organically grown grains are also back as part of the sustainability movement." Pizzerias can add extra excitement to the menu by featuring trending grains such as quinoa or freekeh in their crusts, according to Reinhart. "It tastes good and shows the effort you're putting in to help people enjoy their pizza," he says. "Anything you add to your pizza has to make sense from a flavor standpoint and a functional standpoint."

Kalanty says that while consumers and operators continue to show interest in locally sourced ingredients and commodities, such as flour, what's more important than the locally sourced aspect is that the flour is product-identified. "You can go to your purveyor, and they can say, 'Yes, this is the flour that we got from Farmer Bob from this farm in this



Acapulco Gold pizza by Justin DeLeon of Apollonia's Pizza in Los Angeles (credit: Pizza Quest).

## Reduce, Reuse, Upcycle?

Growing technology allows manufacturers to take the spent grain from breweries and other manufacturing processes and turn it into flour for baked goods like pizza. In the past, spent grain was used for compost or animal feed. Today, new sustainable options are possible with this readily available asset. Pizzeria Paradiso in Washington, D.C., utilizes spent brewery grain in its Brewer's Pizza Crust, and Shuggie's Trash Pie in San Francisco utilizes spent oat flour (taken from the grain remaining after oat milk is processed) in its Casino pizza.

season,’ and Farmer Bob can confirm that everything has been accurately traced,” Kalanty says.

The world of artisanal bread has had a major impact on pizza dough, according to Arena. “What was largely a very simple process in most pizzerias is now guided by science and a much higher level of proficiency,” he says. “Methods such as bulk fermentation, pre-ferments, natural leavening, improved mixing and flour blending are now common in many pizzerias. Even consumers are now conscious of these methods and ask about them.”

## Keeping Comfortable

Pizza will always be considered a comfort food. And while it can be comforting with vegan cheese and veggies on top, it’s perhaps most comforting with a bit of extra fat thrown in for good measure. The trends toward using cup-and-char pepperoni that holds a bit of grease and making thicker, fluffier crusts that cradle hand-pulled mozzarella or freshly grated cheddar are becoming the norm.

For a bit more indulgence, some chefs are adding animal fats into the dough, too. Take for example Brohner’s lox and cream cheese pizza. In it, he replaces the olive oil in a New York-style dough with rendered chicken fat (schmaltz).

“I think that schmaltz adds a depth of flavor, color and texture that you don’t get from olive oil... or even butter,” Brohner says. “Like

### Pour Me a Pizza

Vlogger [@emmymade](#) uses a style similar to a Dutch baby pancake; recipes usually involve mixing flour, salt, eggs and milk before pouring the mixture in a hot cast iron skillet or baking pan and parbaking the dough in the oven at 425 F. Once the crust is firm and golden, it’s topped with sauce, cheese and anything else before being returned to the oven to finish.



Chefs are using the bounty of the seasons, including Chef Tony Gemignani for his cast iron tomato and mint pizza (credit: Pizza Quest).

the chefs I consult for, I don’t like to waste anything, so instead of discarding the chicken jus and schmaltz left over after roasting a chicken, I found a way to use them in dough. It’s delicious but not a flavor that most people recognize.”

Infusing cheese right into the dough also adds fat and flavor. Reinhart created something called an embedded cheese method for the owner of Mash’d in Texas, who wanted to add a Detroit-style pizza into a restaurant setting. In the recipe, Reinhart adds some of the Wisconsin brick cheese on the dough before it rises, and then allows the dough to rise around the cheese. “The cheese becomes part of the dough and is protected by the dough, so it doesn’t burn,” Reinhart says. “It creates a very creamy, buttery quality in the crust, elevating it.”

## Pushing the Envelope

Technology doesn’t end with TVs and telephones. Pizza dough is ready



for tech-driven innovations, too. Brohner is wrapping up a consulting project with a team of former rocket scientists (former SpaceX engineers who jumped ship to launch Stellar Pizza, which uses a robotic food truck to make pizza of the future). “Of course, the lack of human interaction meant the dough had to be bulletproof — after all, robots cannot easily adjust to the constant changes in the dough-making process the way a human baker can,” Brohner says. “After overcoming lots of unique challenges, the company is finally launching to the public, and the pizza has been well received.”

Along with streamlined systems and increases in technology comes a need for more consistency in dough, as well. “As dough becomes more process-driven, the need for technology has increased in order to produce consistent results,” Arena says. “More operators are using water meters, chillers and purification systems. Standard planetary all-purpose mixers are giving way to dough-specific mixers such as spiral or fork mixers.”

New trends, innovations and game-changing dough possibilities will forever be introduced to the pizza world through social media, trade shows and cookbooks. Understanding how to implement these new techniques and deciding which ones will excite your kitchen and customers will likely keep you up at night. Trust in trial and error and take comfort in knowing that most consumers love trying something new, even for a limited time.

Pizza aficionado Liz Barrett Foster is the author of “Pizza: A Slice of American History.” She is also the former editor-in-chief of PMQ Pizza Magazine and is a regular contributor to National Culinary Review.

## Regional Pizza Styles

Pizza crust styles used to be a regional phenomenon but are quickly spreading across the world thanks to social media. Here are a few examples, which all sport a distinguishable crust.



**New York Style**  
– large, foldable slices

**Sicilian** – thick, airy crust with high sides and a crunchy base

**Detroit Style** – similar in style to Sicilian, but notable for its Wisconsin brick cheese that’s caramelized around the edges



**Chicago Deep Dish** – round, thick, filling pizza, topped with sauce and sometimes a top layer of dough



**Chicago Tavern (“party-cut”)** – super thin round pizza cut into squares



**New Haven Pizza** – similar to New York-style pizza, but baked in a coal-fire oven, lending a unique char and smoky flavor

**St. Louis Style** – crust style is like a Chicago Tavern crust, but topped with a local cheese called Provel



**Quad Cities Style** – this crust features malt in it and is cut into strips instead of triangles

**Grandma** – a thin version of Sicilian-style pizza with a crunchy, buttery crust