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Introduction to Pizza

Pizza is worldwide. In the United States its popularity began after World War II. Today we have over 50,000 places selling about \$30 billion of pizza per year in North America alone. At least five factors have fueled its growth. First, pizza combines ingredients from all basic food groups. Second, it requires personal involvement — the cutting, picking, pulling actions make it a unique eating experience. Third, it's a social food. Eating pizza involves sharing — the “breaking of bread.” Fourth, pizza embodies exciting, universal flavors — fresh baked bread, tangy tomato, Italian seasonings, cheese and, in many cases, spicy meats and vegetables. Finally, it's a versatile food that has thousands of variations. It's no wonder this amazing creation has risen from humble beginnings to become one of the world's most exciting, popular, and interesting foods.

What is Pizza?



To discuss pizza we must first define it. Derived from a dictionary, our official definition is:

PIZZA is a flat, open-faced pie of Italian origin, consisting of a bread-like crust topped with seasoned tomato sauce and cheese, often garnished with savory meats and vegetables.

Pizza Classification

Traditionally, pizza has been classified by thickness, shape, and assembly platform.

Crust Thickness

Pizza comes in thin, medium, and thick crust versions. The amount of dough is the main factor affecting crust thickness. However, the amount of rise also plays a part. Dough that is either under-risen or over-risen, or else is flattened before baking, tends to produce a thinner crust than one that's allowed to rise (or proof) to an optimum level after rolling and before baking. As a general guide, this is how much dough relates to crust thickness for a 12-inch round pizza.

Dough Weights for 12-inch Round Pizza

Thin Crust = 11 oz or less of dough

Medium Crust = 12 to 16 oz of dough

Thick Crust = 17 oz or more dough

So we could say that a thin crust pizza averages less than 0.10 oz of dough per square inch of crust and a thick crust pizza averages more than 0.15 oz per square inch. A medium crust would be in between.

Generally, thin crust pizzas are made with a lean dough — that is, a dough containing little or no oil, eggs, and sugar. A round, thin-crust pizza is sometimes called *Neapolitan pizza*. It's probably the most basic style of pizza.

In recent years medium crust pizza has evolved from thin crust, mostly from an attempt to add firmness to the slice.

Thick crust pizzas are often made with a richer dough (although some are made with lean dough) — which contains more oil, sugar and, possibly, eggs. They are sometimes called *Sicilian pizza*.

Shape

Pizzas are also classified by shape — namely, round and rectangular. Pizza that's made in a rectangular sheet pan is sometimes called “Italian bakery” pizza — the place where it originated. However, round is the most common shape in pizzerias, probably because it's the easiest to make.

There are also specialty shapes, such as heart-shaped pizza, which is a perennial valentine's day favorite.

Assembly Platform

Pizzas are also classified according to the platform on which they're assembled. Basically, there are three: pan, screen, and peel (or paddle) — known as pan pizza, screen pizza, and hearth-baked pizza, respectively. Pan pizza is also called deep-dish pizza and skillet pizza. Thicker crust pizzas tend to be made in a pan while thinner ones are often assembled on a screen or peel. When made on a peel, a pizza is baked directly on the hearth or oven deck. A variation on hearth-baked pizza involves making and baking the pizza on non-burning silicon-treated paper. A pizza on paper is assembled on a peel and slid from the peel onto the deck for baking.

Originally all pizzas were hearth-baked. However, because novices often disfigured and ruined pizzas with that method, the pizza screen was invented. Some people claim there's a quality difference between screen and hearth-baked pizza; others disagree.