

# NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

# Pizza

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# Regional Classics,



## PIZZA PERFECTION

By **Jeffrey Spear**

Pizza is undoubtedly one of America's most beloved foods. Its most popular configuration is typically a round, thin-crust, oven-baked New York style, wood-fired Neapolitan, or a hybrid of the two, with a few other styles taking over the food service landscape in some parts of the country. Deciding which pizza style qualifies as the "best" is a challenge but one worth exploring.

**ACF Chef Curt Wagner, CEPC**, Corporate Chef for General Mills, says, *"There are three basic elements that contribute to a pizza's appeal: dough, sauce, and cheese. Each of these elements has a flavor that, when properly balanced, makes the perfect pie."*

To better understand what makes a pie balanced, here's an insight into the styles, toppings, and flavors that are trending, including a look at a few noteworthy pizzerias that are finding success by reimagining this beloved classic.



*"A well-balanced pie will be good regardless of style."*

ACF Chef Curt Wagner,  
CEPC, Corporate Chef for  
General Mills





# Global Inspirations

## THE FOUNDATION: CRUST VARIATIONS ACROSS AMERICA

*Regarding thin crust varieties, the Neapolitan style is the most ubiquitous.* Baked at remarkably high temperatures, anywhere between 800°F and 1000°F for about 90 seconds, this round, usually 12-inch pizza is distinguished by its slightly chewy interior and a lightly charred, bubbly, and crispy crust. *Frequently confused with the New York style*, its equally popular big city cousin is considerably larger, measuring around 18 inches and relying on a crust that's somewhat thinner, sturdier, and nowhere near as chewy. It's also baked longer, around 12 to 15 minutes, in a conventional oven set between 500°F to 600°F.

*Speaking of crispy and chewy, the thick-crust Detroit-style pizza*, developed in 1946 at Buddy's Rendezvous, now Buddy's Pizza in Detroit, MI, has become a nationally recognized sensation. The focaccia-like dough is double-proofed, stretched to fit a rectangular pan, packed to the edges with cheese, and striped with tomato

sauce. When baked, typically around 700°F, the cheese drips down along the dough's edges, caramelizing against the walls of the pan and creating a wonderfully lacy and crispy perimeter.

*Another equally popular midwestern pie, first served by Pizzeria Uno in 1943, is the Chicago deep-dish pan pizza.* Baked in a high-walled pan instead of a tray, it sports a considerably thicker and breadier crust, is heavily layered with cheese, sauce, and toppings, and is baked longer at lower temperatures. This heavyweight pie is in a class all its own.

*Last is the Grandma style, also known as Pizza alla nonna.* A quick and relatively easy-to-make pie originally prepared by Italian immigrants living in New York, this one features a thick, dense crust made with unproofed dough. Assembled in a rectangular pan heavily coated with olive oil and baked at 500°F for about 15 minutes, the crust has an unmistakable crunchy texture.





# Beyond Pepperoni

## THE NEW FLAVOR FRONTIER

Assuming the crust is perfectly made, the toppings are the other factor that will set each slice apart. While cheese, pepperoni, most recently cup pepperoni, onions, sausage, bacon, and mushrooms are at the top of the list, *hot honey, chili sauce, arugula, balsamic, goat cheese, figs, and prosciutto are becoming increasingly popular toppings for pies.* Plus, global flavors are increasingly finding their way onto pizzas.

This is apparent at **Leña Pizza + Bagels in Cleveland, MS**, where their “al Pastor,” marinated pork, “Chorizo + Papas,” pork chorizo, roasted potatoes, and “Sonoran” refried beans in place of tomato sauce, roasted jalapeño salsa, pizzas, all made with traditional Neapolitan crusts, have become local favorites.

**Chef and Owner Marisol Doyle** reveals her inspiration: *“I’m not afraid of new combinations. So, I tried some Mexican ingredients I grew up with.”* When asked about their popularity, she adds, “Once I started putting my ideas out there, something different every week, our guests were hooked.”

Owner Aaron Truong and Chef Elden Chan at Hapa Pizza saw an opportunity to innovate, leveraging their Asian heritage and ingredients to make Neapolitan-style pizzas.





Similarly, Owner Aaron Truong and Chef Elden Chan at *Hapa Pizza in Beaverton, OR*, saw an opportunity to innovate, leveraging their Asian heritage with ingredients such as mala honey, jalapeño sambal, Thai basil, red curry, and yuzu to make Neapolitan-style pizzas. Truong says, "We take Italian pizza craft and Asian cuisine seriously. For us to push boundaries, we make sure to show respect for both traditions." Chan adds, *"Our guests thought our curiously configured pizzas, including Bánh Mi, Red Curry, and Mushroom Suki-yaki, were a gimmick. They were surprised to find out just how good they could be."*

At *Prati Italia, Jacksonville, FL*, Chef and Owner Tom Gray elected to forge a new path for his pizza. *"After years of serving Neapolitan-style pizzas, I wanted to challenge myself to create something new,"* he says.

"Today, we're making an old-world/new-world blend of Roman and Detroit styles. It's a long-fermented dough baked in a rectangular pan that yields a thick, fluffy crust like classic Roman pizzas, known as *al taglio*. We add a baked crispy, cheesy edge, a little like Detroit-style. Toppings are familiar and adventurous, applied from edge to edge, and perfectly paired with the cheese and crust."



Sweet Potato Bacon Pizza from Leña Pizza + Bagels

*"Today, we're making an old-world/new-world blend of Roman and Detroit styles."*

Chef and Owner Tom Gray of Prati Italia



## THE SECRET SAUCE: BALANCE REMAINS KEY

While New York, Detroit, and Neapolitan styles continue to dominate menus nationwide, creative reinvention distinguishes the most noteworthy pizzerias today. Chef Doyle's Mexican-inspired creations, Hapa Pizza's Asian fusion approach, and Chef Gray's Roman and Detroit hybrid demonstrate how innovation can transform this beloved classic.

*Despite their varied approaches and bold ingredient combinations, successful pizza makers understand that a well-balanced combination of crust, sauce, and cheese forms the foundation of any exceptional pie.*

As Chef Wagner aptly noted, "A well-balanced pie will be good regardless of style." This fundamental principle guides traditional pizzerias and those venturing into uncharted culinary territory, ensuring that its essential appeal remains unchanged as pizza continues to evolve. A versatile dish consistently delivers winning results, one slice at a time.