

# The BY TRACY MORIN PIZZA Styles GUIDE

From epic Italian classics to small-town American experiments, the diverse range of pie styles developed over centuries may prove the theory that there's no such thing as bad pizza.

**P**IZZA: IT'S A TOPIC ON WHICH EVERYONE—*everyone*—has an opinion. Isn't that part of the fun?

Of course, another part of the fun is exploring the many different interpretations of pizza that have sprung up around the world. From unique toppings to one-of-a-kind crusts, secret sauces to signature cheese blends, pizza can accommodate

virtually any combination of elements—and still delight the legions of fans who grew up with it (even when outsiders are left scratching their heads).

Here, *PMQ Pizza* presents a roundup of 15 styles—from bona-fide legends to little-knowns—that show just how adaptable this beloved food is.

## New York

The story of New York-style pizza—its history, evolution and spread around the globe—can (and has) filled volumes, but here's a New-York-minute summary: This pizza changed the game. One of the greatest gifts of the turn-of-the-century Italian migration to America's East Coast, New York-style pies were pioneered at legendary, still-thriving NYC spots like Lombardi's (established 1905) and John's of Bleecker Street (1929) in Manhattan. Other boroughs jumped on the bandwagon with their own renditions, like Brooklyn's Totonno's (1924) and Denino's (1937) in Staten Island.

The New York style is known for its crisp, thin, foldable crust made with high-gluten flour, topped with basic ingredients like part-skim mozz ("plain") and pepperoni. It quickly branched out and evolved—and continues to flourish worldwide today. But pizza lovers flock to the mecca for a reason: Emulating the city itself, NYC visitors can revel in a true pizza melting pot.



MADE IN NEW YORK



UNA PIZZA NAPOLETANA

## Neapolitan

Characterized by a lengthy dough ferment, a high-temperature bake in a 900° to 1,000° wood-fired oven (lending irresistible bits of char to the pillowy crust), and minimal, traditional toppings, Neapolitan is an unquestionable classic. It also carries highly specific rules. In fact, entire organizations have sprung up to protect its authenticity, most famously the Associazione Pizzaiuoli Napoletani (APN) and the Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana (VPN).

Together, they outline the ingredients and procedures that create "authentic" Neapolitan, which includes everything from the type of mixer used and dough stretching procedures to oven operation and proofing. The pizzas are decidedly simple, with four ingredients in the dough (flour, salt, yeast and water) and simple Italian-sourced toppings, such as tomatoes, fior di latte or bufala mozzarella, extra-virgin olive oil and fresh basil. It's a pie style on which ingredients are meant to shine—and there's no place for a shoddy pizzaiolo to hide.

## Chicago Tavern Thin-Crust

No disrespect to Chicago's other famous pies, but locals and pizza connoisseurs know that the king of Chicago pizza is the thin-crust tavern style. This round pie—with its cracker-like crust cut into squares, not triangles—is a staple for Chicagoans. It even received its own holiday when Mayor Brandon Johnson made October 22 National Tavern-Style Pizza Day in 2024.

This designation was championed by one of the city's historic pizzerias, Home Run Inn, which, true to the pizza it birthed (and like fellow Windy City icon Vito & Nick's) started as a tavern before adding pizza to the menu to feed drinking patrons. Accordingly, the crispy squares are shareable, snackable and sturdy, ideal for the blue-collar crowds they once fed—and as a base for Chicago's beloved No. 1 topping, sausage, or its go-to condiment, pickled giardiniera.



HOME RUN INN

## Chicago Deep-Dish

As much as Chicagoans associate pizza with the tavern style, tourists and outsiders associate Chicago with deep dish. However, this hefty creation was popularized by a Texas transplant, Ike Sewell, who first served it at Pizzeria Uno, which opened in 1943 in the city's River North District. The pizza was such a hit that by 1955, he opened a second location one block away.

Though history books note that the original recipe could have been a collaboration between Sewell and his business partner Ric Riccardo (born Richard Novaretti) or chef Rudy Malnati Sr., it seems to be inspired by the Easter pies of Italy's Turano region. Its key characteristics include dough pressed into a well-seasoned, oiled pan; crushed tomatoes, sliced mozzarella and sausage discs as toppings; and a lengthy bake time (30 to 35 minutes) to cook everything through to perfection. It's knife-and-fork pizza, the kind you may be able to eat just a slice or two of—ideal for Texas (and America itself), where bigger is usually better.



GIORDANO'S

## Chicago Stuffed Crust

The third style that comprises Chicago's triumvirate, this pie is credited to Italian immigrant Rocco Palese, who owned Guy's Pizza in the Windy City. After a trip back home to Potenza, Italy, he meshed his mother's recipe for scarciiedda, the Italian Easter cake stuffed with ricotta and other fillings, with his pizza. Voilà—the stuffed style was born.

In 1974, Palese opened Nancy's Pizza in Harwood Heights, Illinois, to sell his new creation. While sharing certain characteristics with deep dish—it's also hefty and baked in a pan—it differs in key ways: The pan is greased with butter, it's topped with shredded mozz and pinched sausage, and there's a second layer of dough just underneath the sauce on top. A 12" pie weighs in at a whopping five pounds, substantial enough for the media to pay attention: In 1975, it was named the city's best by *Chicago Magazine*, cementing its spot as an icon in the making.



NANCY'S PIZZA



## California

California is a massive state, so it's difficult to pigeonhole its diverse pies into a single slot. But most associate the Golden State with fresh, creative recipes, an approach made famous by Chez Panisse, Wolfgang Puck and California Pizza Kitchen. This heritage jostles alongside historic Cali-grown chains like Round Table Pizza; old-school wood-fired excellence at Tomasso's (established 1935); and neo-Neapolitan at swanky hotspots like Pizzeria Mozza and Flour + Water.

But the general ethos of this progressive West Coast state can't help but soak into its famed pizzas. No surprise, then, that local, seasonal ingredients, Asian and Mexican influences, healthy-halo thin crusts, outside-the-box topping combinations and an artisanal touch infuse so many pies from California.

## Detroit

Buddy's Rendezvous Pizza, opened in 1946 by Gus Guerra, birthed the now-iconic (and, in recent years, rapidly spreading) Detroit style. Fans love its crunchy, caramelized edges and airy crust, courtesy of baking in an oiled pan with cheese spread to the edges, plus a stickier dough made with flour, salt, water and fresh cake yeast.

True to its origins in Motor City, the original pans used to bake the pizzas weren't your typical cookware—they were rectangular blue steel pans, sourced from the automotive industry. Toppings, too, are applied in a unique fashion: pepperoni directly atop the dough, then brick cheese (not mozzarella), and three spoonfuls of sauce skimmed across the top so it "bleeds" across the pie while baking.



FRANK PEPE PIZZERIA NAPOLETANA



## New Haven

A style so legendary it has its own name: apizza (pronounced ah-beetz). While lesser lauded than nearby New York, New Haven pizza is every bit as entrenched in the American pizza landscape—in fact, some have called that city the *real* pizza capital of the U.S.

That’s not a (dough) stretch at all, considering that this city is credited as having the most pizzerias per capita in the country. Plus, the history of its style is stalwart: Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana (established 1925), Modern Apizza (1934) and Sally’s (1938) still serve up thin-crust, crunchy, charred beauties fresh from their original coal ovens. The dough is made with a lower-protein flour and longer fermentation, while simple toppings—think clams, anchovies, crushed tomatoes and Pecorino—embrace old-school flavors that remain every bit as beloved today.

## Roman

With nearly 70 years of history in Italy, this style hit the States in a big way in the 2010s, when Roman pizza master Massimiliano Saieva opened his Pizzarium in the U.S. Later, he opened the Roman Pizza Academy to instruct aspiring makers of pizza al taglio (which means “pizza by the cut”).

The high-hydration (80% to 100%) dough is matured with a lengthy fermentation (48 to 96 hours) and cooked in a pan, giving it a crunchy exterior and an airy, light, soft interior after baking. This dough creates a product that reheats well—ideal for al taglio purveyors, both in Italy and Stateside, which often display them in cases to customers with toppings ranging from classic to gourmet. After a quick pass in the oven, these slices are sturdy enough for eating on the go (or, when in Rome, *passaggiata*).

## The Styles We Missed

Yes, we know, we know: This guide doesn’t cover every pizza style. But we haven’t forgotten yours. Visit [PMQ.com](http://PMQ.com) and subscribe to our newsletter to get the lowdown on other regional styles—like Boardwalk, Pan-Fried Sicilian, Maryland, Colorado and others—as well as digital-exclusive pizzeria profiles, recipes and the latest pizza news!

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PIZZARIUM

## St. Louis

This style may not enjoy the fame of its Midwestern neighbor to the north, Chicago, but it's an original nonetheless—with its share of detractors as well as die-hard fans. The dough is made without yeast or a rise time, creating a cracker-thin, crunchy crust for its round pies, which are cut into squares (called the party or tavern cut).

On top, a slightly sweet sauce blends with spread-to-the-edge toppings and, most famously, Provel cheese rather than traditional mozz. This stretchless cheese, created specifically for pizza in 1947, was adopted by pizzerias like Farotto's (established 1956) and Imo's (1964) and combines provolone, Swiss, cheddar and liquid smoke—possibly to evoke wood-fired flavors, no open flame necessary.



## Old Forge

Nicknaming your small town “The Pizza Capital of the World” takes courage, but ask the pizza makers of Old Forge, Pennsylvania, and they'll tell you it's more a movement of solidarity than arrogance. After all, in this community of less than 9,000, pizza has reportedly been going strong since 1926, when a local tavern started serving pizzas baked in rectangular metal pans to local coal miners.

While each pizzeria has its own slightly different take, this crust is breadlike with a chewy, spongier center and a crispy bottom; a robust sauce that's slightly sweet and chunkier; and a signature cheese blend that remains a closely guarded secret at each shop. The terminology, too, is unique: Cuts, not slices, are served in a tray vs. whole pies.



CALOGERO'S



FAT JACK'S

## Quad Cities

Contrary to expectation, the Quad Cities are actually composed of *five* towns. They all line the Mississippi River: Rock Island, Moline and East Moline in northwestern Illinois, and Davenport and Bettendorf in southeastern Iowa.

Here, the Quad Cities pizza style is made with a dough that features malt and molasses and picks up a light dusting of cornmeal sprinkled on the pizza peel before heading into the deck oven at 500° for about eight minutes. Its thick sauce carries a slight “bite,” while a heap of Midwestern mozz on top creates the gooey factor. Traditionally, it's cut with cooking shears, not a pizza cutter, into strips vs. triangles. Perhaps this area's most famous specialty-pie innovation is the Taco Pizza, credited to Iowa icon Happy Joe's Pizza & Ice Cream (opened in 1972).



## Grandma

A “grandma pie” may sound vague—after all, Italian nonnas each masterminded their own cooking techniques—but this overall style carved out its popularity in the U.S. in the mid- to late 1990s. Some call it a thin-crust Sicilian. And, indeed, it’s thinner than a Sicilian, thanks to a shorter proofing time (no longer than 40 minutes in the pan) and less dough. Pizzaioli typically place a garlic-forward sauce on top of the cheese, not underneath it, and finish the pie with sparsely placed slices of fresh mozzarella.

While this style originated in homes, it was popularized commercially at Umberto’s Pizzeria & Restaurant in New Hyde Park on Long Island, New York. Served first to employees only, it made the menu by the late 1980s and soon spread through the region—and far beyond.

## Brier Hill

Named after an Italian neighborhood in Youngstown, Ohio, this bare-bones pie style was handed down by matriarchs who didn’t have a lot of money—or food—to spare. As such, ingredients rely on veggies grown in grandmas’ gardens (tomatoes for sauce and peppers as a topping), plus grated Romano instead of mozzarella—all bolstered by a medium-thick breadlike crust that packs a crunch from baking in deck ovens. It may be a little-known style outside of its Eastern Ohio birthplace, but it remains a staple in the area and has sold like hotcakes for one local church’s fundraiser for more than 50 years.



## Hot Oil Bar Pie

Born at the Colony Grill, open since 1935 in Fairfield, Connecticut, this style started in the ’40s as a way to feed hungry tavern-goers. Like many tavern-style varieties, the 12” pies are super-thin and stiff-crust (think part-chewy, part-cracker) to hold up without drooping at the bar.

But a key addition in the 1970s—hot oil—took the pie to another level. Spicy drizzles, added on top of the pie before baking, give the finished product an alluring heat and crispiness, while Stingers (hot peppers) can kick up the fire factor another notch. In recent years, this once-regional style has spread down the Eastern Seaboard, all the way to Florida, gaining new fans along the way. ▼

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