Pick Your Perfect Pizza

Adding Up the Things that Create a Pie You Can Sink Your Teeth Into

By Rosanne Dunkelberger

Pizza just might be the perfect food.

With the right toppings, it hits most of the main food groups. It’s easy to portion, serve and eat. It’s relatively cheap — and really, really delicious.

While the concept of a flavored flatbread goes back to antiquity, the tomato-and-cheese-topped pie Americans are familiar with started out as peasant food in Naples sometime in the 16th century, after Columbus brought tomatoes to Italy. (In an article in American Heritage magazine, food historian Hanna Miller said Sophia Loren, who had grown up thinking of pizza as poor people’s food, pitied Americans when she first came to the U.S. after seeing the proliferation of pizza parlors here.)

Pizza landed in the big cities of the eastern seaboard in the early 20th Century, brought by Italian immigrants who settled there. Its popularity boomed after World War II, sparked by returning soldiers who developed a taste for the local fare while stationed in Italy.

“It’s a food that fits the bill for people on a lot of occasions,” says Kevin Keating, dean of culinary arts at Tallahassee’s Keiser University. “There are so many things about it that work.”

“Born and raised” in New York City, Keating claims that city’s iteration of pizza is the best, calling it the “quintessential street food” whose goodness can be determined “by how much grease you have dripping down your arm.” The Big Apple’s traditional-looking round pie is Neapolitan-style. Chicago’s layered deep-dish version, which is served in rectangles, is more like Sicilian pizza.

New Yorkers will tell you the city’s water contributes to a perfect crust, and Keating says they aren’t just blowing smoke. “It comes from the reservoir out of the Catskills and Adirondack Mountains. Its soft water, which means it has high sodium and low calcium and minerals,” the chef explains. “The dough gets conditioned, and that’s what gives New York pizza its characteristic texture and flavor.” Pizza crust should also be made from high-gluten flour and it should be given “a good workout” to develop the gluten, he says.

New York pizza aficionados also credit wood-fired ovens for their pie’s quality. It’s not really the wood or the hearth-style oven that creates the proper crust, Keating says. It’s the high temperatures — upwards of 800 degrees — that deserve the credit. At lower temperatures, “the crust doesn’t cook the same way, so you kind of lose out on some of that crispness.”
Pizza sauce is simple, Keating says, “just a basic tomato sauce flavored with oregano, garlic, salt … maybe some bay leaf in there too.” It’s not the ingredients, but the cooking time that makes a super sauce, he contends. “You need to allow the acidity to cook out of the tomatoes.” He also cautions against too much sauce. “Spread it out to get that thin coating. Too much sauce ruins the crust.”

A stellar pizza should also feature fresh, not processed, mozzarella cheese, Keating advises.

But when it gets right down to it, figuring out what combination of ingredients adds up to your perfect pizza is up to you. We’ve deconstructed the pies from 13 local restaurants and pizzerias and created a chart to help you pick a favorite. Mangia!

Pizza Pairings

Wine authority Lee Satterfield, owner of Lee’s Wine Bar in Lake Ella Plaza, offers a few suggestions for pairing libations with pizza.

» “A red zinfandel is great, especially with pepperoni,” he says, because the spiciness in both complement each other. If you’re eating a pie topped with earthier flavors like mushrooms, a French pinot noir is a good choice. “I also love a nice shiraz,” Satterfield says.

» Satterfield’s surprise pick is a “nice, dry rosé” because “it’s so cool and helps cut the spice.”

» When it comes to beers, he advises, “you don’t want anything too heavy.” Belgian Stella Artois is “a great pizza beer,” or consider Samuel Adams Boston Lager or a pale ale like Sierra Nevada.

Lighten Up Your Slice

With fiber in the crust, calcium-rich cheese and lycopene-filled tomato sauce, pizza can be a healthful and nutritious meal option. But your choices when ordering can make a huge difference in the ultimate fat and calorie count.

For example, a single slice of a Pizza Hut medium-sized, thin-crust Veggie Lover’s pizza has 170 calories and six grams of fat, according to calorielab.com. The same-sized stuffed-crust Meat Lover’s pizza clocks in at a whopping 410 calories and 17 grams of fat.

For people who want to watch their calorie and fat intake, nutritionist Dr. Freddy Kaye has this suggestion:

Start out with a green salad and light dressing on the side. Then, order a marinara pizza — that is, with sauce but no cheese — and load it with vegetable toppings. (For inspiration, Village Inn Pizza & Pasta’s Florentine Pizza has fresh mushrooms, spinach, sliced tomatoes and garlic.) Grab the parmesan shaker and have at it — it punches up the flavor with only 22 calories per tablespoon, he says.

“The salad and pizza will fill you up when a slice won’t do it alone,” Kaye says. “Or, just eat slowly and enjoy the taste without the volume.”