



February 2010

**IN THIS ISSUE**

**Featured Article**

**Homemade Pizza:  
Your Questions  
Answered**



**Featured Recipe**

**Fried Artichoke &  
Caramelized Onion  
Pizza**



**EXPERIENCE  
UMBRIA IN  
SPRING & FALL!**

**Register for  
our upcoming  
classes  
in May, June,  
Oct, or Nov  
2010!**

**Click here for  
more info.**

*A Note From Chef Gerri*



Dear Friends and Food Lovers,

If you haven't noticed, a rebirth of pizza is sweeping through New York. For years, after returning home from eating pizza in Naples, Rome, and in the vicinity of my cooking school, Cucina della Terra near Castiglione del Lago, Umbria, I found pizza in New York to be disappointing. Aside from a few pizzerias with little ambience, scattered throughout the boroughs, local pizzerias serve up pizzas made from inexpensive high gluten flours, topped with pre-grated bags of tasteless commercial mozzarella, inferior tomato sauce, dried flakes of oregano and parmigiano cheese from a jar without the faintest resemblance of the Neapolitan tradition.

Seventy-five years ago things were different. According to an astute 85 year old woman, my mother, the area in what is known as East Harlem housed a new immigrant population from southern Italy. There, pizzerias offered delicious crusted pizza baked in wood burning ovens and oozing with fresh cows' milk mozzarella, tomato & basil. For my mother, pizza was not fast food for a weekly dinner, but a special trip to 116th street with her mother and father during the feast days. She didn't walk into a pizzeria. Rather, she descended into the basement of the low buildings lining the street. When there were no feast days that deemed a special outing, pizza was made and consumed at home.

Recently, with the opening of Co., Pizza Numero 28, Motorino, and Keste, along with the old-timers like Di Fara's, Grimaldi's, and Lombardi's, New York is finally able to offer something that comes close to the original. Of course an imported brick oven capable of burning wood and reaching temperatures of 650 degrees improves the chances of getting that perfect crust. Nevertheless, it's possible to create a delicious version at home just like the nonna's & nonno's of yesteryear.

Perhaps the answers to your questions will help you during your next attempt at pizza dough.

Ciao,  
Gerri

# HOMEMADE PIZZA - Q&A

***Having taught dozens of pizza classes, I've accumulated various questions from my students; the answers to which I hope will help improve the outcome of your efforts.***



## **How do you get a great tasting crisp thin crust?**

First, great dough has to begin with great flour. Personally, I am dedicated to 00 flour. It's got just the right extensible (stretchable) quality and great flavor. Once mixed, the dough should feel tacky. When you are adding flour to the yeast and water, hold back some flour. Start working your dough until the gluten is developed. This may take up to 10 minutes by hand. Resist the impulse to add more flour. Wetter, tackier dough will produce beautiful, irregularly shaped air pockets in the final crust.

Next, let your dough relax for a few hours; overnight in the refrigerator is even better. You've given it a work out and it needs to relax and develop flavor.

Then, whenever you're up to it, divide the dough into 9 to 12 oz pieces. The exact size is purely a matter of preference. Round them into tight smooth balls and place them on a floured pan. Cover with oiled plastic and hold at room temperature for an hour or more.



## **Can you stretch cold dough?**

Absolutely not. The dough needs to be at a comfortable room temperature. Plan ahead.

## **Toppings?**

This may be a matter of personal preference, but please leave the wasabi for sushi and the pineapple for your ham. Roasted vegetables such as cauliflower, zucchini, eggplant, peppers, raw zucchini flowers, grated parmigiano or pecorino, tomato sauce, prosciutto, sautéed spinach, caramelized onions, sautéed mushrooms, cooked fresh sausages, hot & sweet, fried artichoke wedges, gorgonzola, arugula, ricotta or mozzarella, fresh basil leaves, minced fresh thyme and oregano make fine toppings. Of course, a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil is a must.

## **How do you stretch the dough to get the thin center and thick outer crust?**

Generally, you should be able to stretch your dough to a diameter equal to the numerical weight of the dough, eg. 9 oz of dough should be stretched to about 9 inches. Remove a ball of dough from the pan. Gently flatten the dough. Place the backs of your hands under the center of the dough and let gravity stretch the dough. Turn the dough under your hands until you can see the center thinning out. Move your hands out a little widening the area. Place the circle of dough onto a heavily dusted surface, either semolina or cornmeal work best. Begin to stretch the dough outwards until you have the desired size. The thinner your dough, the thinner the final crust. Starting about 1 inch from the edge, press outwards with your index & middle fingers to thicken the edge.



## **Do you need specialized equipment?**

A pizza stone helps retain the heat of the oven and generate a crisper crust. A peel (that long wooden stick with the large flat paddle) is helpful but not necessary. A baking sheet turned upside down can do the job.

**What temperature should I turn the oven thermostat to?**

As high as it will go... 500 degrees if possible.

**How much of my selected ingredients can I put on top of the dough?**

Don't over do it. Less is more because heavy toppings will weigh on the dough and prevent it from sliding off the peel or baking sheet.

**How long will it take before it's done?**

This depends on the heat of your oven and how many times you open and close the door. Remember, the higher the heat, the quicker the crust will form. Every time you open your oven door you are losing 50 degrees.

**For those of you who prefer to eat their pizza as if it were a feast day, here are my favorites in the New York metropolitan area:**

**Di Fara** [www.difara.com](http://www.difara.com)

**Numero 28** [www.numero28.com](http://www.numero28.com)

**Co.** [www.co-pane.com](http://www.co-pane.com)

**Keste** [www.kestepizzeria.com](http://www.kestepizzeria.com)

*Here's a recipe for the delicious pizza in the picture. It's really a culmination of previous topics in my newsletters. If you'd like to know how to prepare an artichoke, see my directions in my previous newsletter, April 2009, which you can find on my website, The key here is to have your toppings precooked before you shape your dough.*

## Fried Artichoke & Caramelized Onion Pizza

*Preheat your oven to 450 degrees or higher*

**Ingredients**

- 1 cup ricotta, seasoned with salt & pepper
- ½ cup caramelized onion slices
- ½ cup diced buffalo mozzarella cheese
- 1 whole artichoke, prepared & cut into ½ inch wedges, fried
- 1 teaspoon minced thyme
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 9 oz of your favorite pizza dough

**Procedure**

1. Shape the dough into a 9 inch circle.
2. Brush the top of the dough lightly with olive oil.
3. Drop teaspoons of ricotta cheese on the top of the pizza
4. Sprinkle the caramelized onion all over the top of the pizza
5. Sprinkle the diced mozzarella all over the top
6. Follow with freshly fried artichoke slices and a sprinkle of thyme.
7. Finish with a light drizzle of extra virgin olive oil
8. Slide the pizza into your oven, preferably onto a preheated pizza stone.

**For more recipes, visit us at <http://www.cucinadellaterra.com>**