

In Search of...

The Milwaukee Pizza

By Marty Lamers



To me, a Milwaukee pizza is a clear thing: it's a thin, crisp cracker crust topped with a gentle amount of ingredients (not piled high or sopping), cut in small squares - not in slices.

Imagine my horror when I went to the Internet and found that the consensus is that there is NOT a Milwaukee pizza, and that tavern style pizzas came from (gasp) Chicago. No, I said, never!

Here at *Tosa Connection*, we get letters constantly from people talking about their favorite local pizza places. Pizza always makes the menus of many busy back-to-school households. But is there truly a Milwaukee style pizza?

THE TAVERN PIZZA

A tavern style pizza has kind of hazy origins, which is probably why all midwestern cities are quick to claim them as our own. While the actual logistical birthplace of this delicacy may be debatable, what is known is this:



- Tavern pies have very thin, flat crusts that don't bubble into air pockets like a NY or California-style crust will do. Tavern style crusts are rolled out much flatter by pin or machine and then poked with multiple tiny holes to release potential air pockets. They are meant to be like little dense crusts holding salty toppings, so you can keep drinking beer. The finished, baked consistency of a tavern pizza crust is closer to a saltine cracker than a thick, gooey piece of bread dough. A stuffed crust would be missing the point completely.
 - Tavern pies might be round or square shaped, but they are typically cut into squares, not slices. Why? Because these fit better on cocktail napkins and were also easier to handle so you could keep drinking beer (note the beery trend starting here? I really miss solid Wisconsin logic!).
 - Tavern pies don't go overboard with toppings. Rather, they will stick to simple traditional ingredients, lightly but evenly spread all over the top so every piece will get some of the goods. Crusts are minimal, so toppings stretch all the way out to the edge of the pie. Common toppings are mozzarella and other Italian cheeses, onion, mushroom, pepperoni, green peppers, black olive, sausage, and for the truly bold, anchovies
- much more than that, and you are getting into a different kind of pizza.
- They probably started somewhere in the late 1930s early 40s and were a raging Midwestern hit by the late 40s.

In Milwaukee, the legendary Caradaro Club was the first place to start offering pizzas in about 1945. Handing out little samples on napkins to get noticed, founders John Caravello and Joe Todaro brilliantly promoted their pizzas. It became wildly popular with everyone who tasted it, and other examples locally were quick to follow.





ZAFFIRO'S

Liborio (Bobby) Zaffiro and John Zaffiro opened Rock A Bye Tap in the Third Ward in 1951 but moved to Zaffiro's current location in '54. Bobby's style of thin crust pizza was soon a local hit, and it became what Zaffiro's is still known for today.

Asked about what his father thought about the Milwaukee pizza argument, current owner Mike Zaffiro said: "My father always said we served panna pies, or tavern pizza. I never heard him mention anything about it coming from Chicago."

"My father wracked his brain to try to make his crust as thin as it is today. It is like a cracker, where other local thin crusts have a little more poof to them." I asked if the ingredients were different and he said no, it was still just yeast, flour, oil, and a little salt. But there are differences in the way they are prepared.



"It's rolled with a machine now, but my father was rolling them all out by hand with a rolling pin. We just can't do it like that now – we make way too many pizzas. And we can't flip or toss the pizza dough because that just won't work."

Mike divulged further secrets to making their best pies: "When we construct our pizza, we work counter-clockwise from the outside in, not the inside out – it gives a more even distribution of toppings. You don't want them all in the center. We are careful to not do too much: I like to end with a quarter to a half inch pizza thickness at best."



SPREADING THE LOVE

Asked if Zaffiro's might ever be expanding into Wauwatosa, Mike said he was reviewing new locations about 10 years ago. "I was considering expanding to somewhere on the north shore, and then I was approached by Marcus Theaters for a distribution deal." Mike said it was the Marcus track record for quality that was attractive in partnership, and they soon came to terms. Mike showed them how to make the pizzas and licensed recipes, and Marcus put pizza for sale in theaters. "Now most of the Marcus theaters in the Midwest are carrying Zaffiro's pizza and so far there are three sit-down restaurants where you can get our pizza, made by Marcus."

"I am very proud of what my dad did, coming up with this, and I am honored to carry on what he and my uncle started. We've been very blessed."



MORE LOCAL FAVES

When the kids are on the way back to school, weekly pizza nights are simply the perfect answer to get everyone fed and keep the ball rolling. There are some wonderful pizza places all over Wauwatosa, and here are a few of our favorites and the ones most mentioned in our mailbag:

Balistreri's on 68th was the epitome of Wauwatosa's best Italian food for me growing up in the 70s. Their pizza is a perfect representation of what I think of in a Milwaukee style – served on cookie sheets and cut into squares, that stuff is what my dreams are made of. I tried my first calamari here, as well as my first anchovy. I kissed many girlfriends here. The Balistreri brothers have since opened a second location on Bluemound, so you can get more of their Italian favorites now all over the city. A simple approach and dedication to

excellence keeps Balistreri's a place you can depend on, meal after delicious meal – they have been doing it right since 1968 and show no signs of slowing down.

Lalli's on North Avenue is a great little Tosa pizza place, serving up tasty pies and yummy appetizers. Crusts are thin and hand tossed. A local fave, Lalli's is a well-established Wauwatosa landmark and a pizza comfort zone that is always inviting. Visit them online: <https://lallispizza.com/>

Wy'East Pizza (5601 W. Vliet Street) is also doing some really interesting things with pizzas and is a true Milwaukee original. Their yeasty crusts puff-up lightly in the oven with air pockets and lovely inconsistencies, so you get depth and variation while it stays light, airy, and delicious. They offer some great takes on classically topped pies and have a variety of both red and white styles to appease your tastebuds, as well

as offering some interesting and delicious seasonal specialties that change every few months. Visit them online:

www.wyeastpizza.com

Looking for some palette teasers, and something that strays from the simpler traditions into a pizza more daring and unconventional? Look at Pizza Man which is a national chain, now offering hungry Tosa residents a location at 11500 West Burleigh. The pizzas here have more of a California-style crust and will often explore blends of more diverse and elegant ingredients as well as the favored old standbys. Find pizza toppings included like crackled porchetta, red-wine-pickled onion, goat cheese, hazelnut-kale pesto, arugula, Calabrian pepper honey, and BBQ chicken confit to satisfy even the oddest of cravings. ☞

OTHER REGIONALLY STYLED PIZZAS

THE NY STYLE PIZZA

One of the most popular pizza styles, this is generally what you are thinking of when you are seeking a "slice." These are larger pies, round in shape, not thick with toppings, and with a decent-sized outer crust. The crust of a NY style pie says a lot – it is at once crunchy and chewy, so it has a simple complexity that is hard to resist. The outer crust is built up and important, and is also improved by stretching the dough, as in tossing it or kneading it well. The individual slices are large, so typically folded in half to eat, and a good crust will not wilt when folded. A standard NY style pizza will have a thin layer of bottom crust with a perfectly laid, thicker outer edge. Normally topped in a traditional style, where the crust holds a lightly seasoned red sauce, then cheese and typical meat and vegetable toppings are added to the buyer's delight. Red sauce predominates, but white varieties using tomatoes and fresh herbs are not uncommon. Toppings are traditionally simple: sausage, onion, pepperoni, mushroom, bell pepper, anchovy, tomato, cheese blends, and not much more. Served by the slice.



THE CALIFORNIA STYLE PIZZA

A California style pizza is very similar to a NY style in preparation and in crusts, but the toppings are much different. They are not going to be made as large as a NY pie, though California pizzas are also round. Toppings on these pizzas are more artisanal in nature, fitting in with the California way of life...you can find all kinds of interesting combinations, like shrimp and pesto, balsamic reductions, arugula, peanut sauce, artichoke hearts, calamari, sun dried tomatoes and so much more. California style pizzas are not reliant on red sauce like a NY style, so they might replace this layer with oils, reductions, or other options. Crusts on these pizzas might end up with small air pockets and even charring that are wonderful little inconsistencies, and part of what makes these unique pies so great. Finished California pizzas are usually sliced but may be cut in squares as well. The cut is not terribly specific as it is in other pizzas.



THE DETROIT STYLE PIZZA

Another popular style in pizzas is much like a pizza bread. The crust on a Detroit pizza is thick and soft, but it does get crispy on the edges as it cooks. The Detroit style is rectangular, baked in a pan, and cut into larger squares or rectangles (not slices). People have been known to fight over the corner pieces because of the wonderful crunchiness these corners hold. Toppings on Detroit pizzas are going to stay with the Italian traditional, like sausage, onion, pepperoni, and cheese. Not quite as filling per piece as a Chicago deep dish, the crispy chew of the crust on Detroit-style pizzas will definitely make you a believer.



THE CHICAGO DEEP DISH

Holy inverted toppings, Batman! A Chicago deep dish takes a pre-baked crust that is worked up the sides and over the bottom of what looks like a heavy pie pan. It is baked for a short time and is filled with cheese, toppings and then sauce – in that order, specifically too, with the sauce on top of the toppings and cheese as the bottom layer. Why? Because if this pizza were built any other way, the middle would be all soggy and the crust would not hold. Instead, a Chicago deep dish pizza stays together wrapped in that delicately baked crust for every delicious bite. If you can do more than one slice in a sitting, my hat's off to you – this piece of pizza is VERY filling, comparatively.