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.

In Search of...

The Milwaukee Pizza

By Marty Lamers
It’s rolled with a machine now, but my father was rolling them all out by hand with a rolling pin. We just don’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—just a more even distribution of toppings. You don’t want them all in the center. We are careful to not to 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 pizzas 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 70’s. 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 calamaris here, as well as my first anchovy. I kissed many girlfriends here. The Balistreri brothers have 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 fare, Lalli’s is a well-established Wauwatosa landmark and a pizza comfort zone that is always inviting. Visit them online: https://lallispizza.com/

WyEast 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 taste buds, as well as offering some interesting and delicious seasonal specialties that change every few months. Visit them online: www.wyepizza.com

Looking for some palate 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 in Wauwatson Village. 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 cruched pottoned, red wine-hipped onion, goat cheese, hazel-nut kale pesto, arugula, Calabrian pepper humpy, and BBQ chicken combi 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 ordering a “slice.” These are larger pizza rounds, close to their full toppings, and with a deconstructed outer crust. The crust of a NY style pizza will start to get a little more chewy and chewy, as 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 or forming it by hand. The individual slices are large, so typically sliced half inch wide, and in general will not cut and will not with folded. A stacked NY style pizza will have a base layer of dough with a hard crust with a perfectly baked, thicker crust edge. Normally topped in a traditional way, where the crust holds a lightly seasoned red sauce, then cheese and typical meat and vegetable toppings are added to the layer’s delight. Red sauce predominates, but white varieties can be found as well. The typical NY style pizza is cut in squares, but a few circles. Toppings are traditionally simple and nationwide in popularity: pepperoni, sausage, anchovies, 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 for toppings they are much different. They are not going to be made as large as a NY pie. Although California pizzas are also thin, their crust is quite different. Toppings on these pizzas are more restrained in nature. Topping with the California way of life, you start all kinds of ever-changing combinations, like spicy sausages, red onion, red peppers, artichokes, red onions, and whatever you can think of. California style pizzas are not reliant on red sauce like a NY style, as they might replace this layer with oil, herbs, reductions, or other ingredients. Creating these pizzas might end up with small artisan pastries and mixing flavors that are wonderful life succession, and part of what makes these unique pies so good. Finished California style pizzas are usually dried but may be cut in squares as well. The cut is not terribly specific, or it is a couple other pizzas.

THE DETROIT STYLE PIZZA

A Detroit style pizza is much like a deep dish, but thinner. The crust of a Detroit pizza is thin and crisp, but it does get crisp on the edges as it cooks. The Detroit style is rectangular, baked on pans, and cut into larger squares or rectangles (not circles). Simple home-based versions are light over the corner pieces because of the wonderful redundancies. Their carry hold. Toppings are very different from a NY style pizza, as it might add salami, pepperoni, pepperoni, hot peppers, red onion, and so many things. A Detroit-style pizza will definitely make you a believer.

THE CHICAGO DEEP DISH

Another popular style pizza, Detroit, or a Chicago deep dish takes a prebaked 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 sauce, toppings, and cheese mix in the oven. If the oven is too hot, it fills with extra cheese. A Chicago deep dish pizza starts together with a deliciously built crust for every delicious bite. If you cut more than one slice at a time, the crust will not hold. Instead, a Chicago deep dish pizza stays together wrapped in that delicately baked crust for every delicious bite. If you cut more than one slice at a time, the crust will not hold. Instead, this piece of pizza will tend to fall apart.