

Adam Ragusea: **Easier pan pizza in a non-stick — browned base and crispy rim**

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Here's a much easier, much more reliable method for making a great pan pizza — a pizza style pioneered in the American Midwest and, yes, popularized by a global chain that rhymes with "eats a glut." They don't need my publicity.

You can use absolutely any pizza dough with this method, but here's what I've been using for pan pizzas lately.

Bread flour, but all-purpose would be fine. A cup to start with - like 120g. I actually put in a little too much. You'll see. Half a teaspoon of salt — maybe 3g. 2-3g of sugar — half a teaspoon. And half a teaspoon of dry yeast — a gram or two. A little glug of olive oil — maybe a couple teaspoons. And you don't have to do this, but garlic powder inside the dough works great with a thick-crust pizza. In a thin crust, too much of it would burn. Just a dash. I'm only making one portion of dough here.

And instead of water, I'm using milk. "Feets a butt" uses various powdered milk products in their crusts. It makes for some very nice caramely notes on the browned surface. Half a cup of milk. Some people say you gotta scald milk before you use it in a yeast bread. Heating it to almost boiling deactivate enzymes or proteins in the milk that can interfere with the gluten and the rise.

I tried this dough with scalded milk and with milk straight from the fridge and I noticed absolutely no difference. Maybe because my milk is pasteurized? I don't know. I do know that I put in too much flour, so more milk to balance it. I think wet, sticky doughs are better for pan pizza. They bake up fluffier.

And when I'm kneading a tiny little ball of dough for just one pizza, I kinda like to do it up in the air, between my hands. This is super easy. You just kinda squish it and grind it between your palms. It's oddly satisfying, and it doesn't get the counter dirty.

Let's see. Is it smooth and elastic enough that I can form a thin sheet without it tearing? Check. Form it into a smooth ball. Meh, I wish it was a little but stickier, but it's fine. Back into the bowl, cover it up, and let it rise for an hour or two. This took two, because my kitchen is super cold right now. Doubled in size. You could absolutely do my normal thing instead, where I put the dough straight in the fridge and let it ferment slowly for a few days. That's good too.

But either way, we're gonna do a second rise in the pan. I used to use cast iron for pan pizza, but I have switched to my non-stick. A 10-inch teflon pan with an oven-safe handle. You could use cast iron, but I have found this makes it so much easier. You'll see why.

Just a little bit of olive oil in the pan — too much and the pizza has a really fried taste to it. Just a dab. And I do like to put some seasonings in this oil. A little pinch of dried oregano, basil, chili flakes, whatever you like, and a tiny pinch of salt. A little salt goes a long way here. And then just completely coat the pan. This results in a distinct layer of flavor on the bottom of the pizza that is quite tasty. Heterogeneity!

And while my hands are still greasy, I'll grab my dough ball and plop it in. I used to stretch the dough first and then lay it in the pan. I've found it's easier to just mash it straight into the pan with my finger tips. This also helps me get a more even thickness throughout. If you do traditional stretching up in the air, the thick outer ring of dough you get tends to make all the sauce and cheese pool into the center with this style of pizza. I'm stretching it up past the corner of the pan — not because I want it up there, but because I know this dough is gonna contract before all is said and done, so start wider than you want it. I'll rub a thin layer of oil on top, because it tastes good and because it'll keep this from drying out as it gets a second rise in the pan, at least for a half hour. That really helps it bake up lighter and fluffier. It tends to be kinda dense and doughy if you skip this second rise.

And while it's rising we can prep everything else. For sauce, I'm still on this particular make and model of canned tomatoes. It's the best thing for pizza sauce I can find in U.S. grocery stores. When I can't find it, I use another brand of crushed or ground tomatoes and I spike it with a little tomato paste for extra flavor. I don't normally measure it, but a third of a cup is perfect for a pan pizza this size, IMHO. Here's my new favorite pizza herb — marjoram. Smells like tea, but tastes like oregano crossed with thyme, maybe? I'll also do some oregano and basil and a tiny pinch of sugar. A little chili flakes, black pepper and a dab of olive oil. Stir it up. That's it. If it looks like not quite enough sauce to me, then it's probably exactly enough.

Let's prep our cheese. For New York-style pizza, I scour the earth for whole milk, low moisture mozzarella. But on my pan pizzas, I've really been liking the part-skim kind lately, and this stuff is way easier to find. It's gotta be low-moisture though. That's an 8 ounce block. I'll use 5-6 ounces, like 150 grams. I miss the full-fat flavor, but the part-skim kind just seems to brown better with this particular recipe, and for that same reason I think it's particularly important to avoid pre-grated cheese for this. The anti-clumping starch they put on the pre-grated stuff is particularly likely to burn with the method I'm gonna show you.

There we go. And lastly, I do like to put some grated parmesan over the sauce layer. I suppose now is as good a time of any to admit that I prefer the pre-grated stuff for pizza. I have real Parmigiano-Reggiano in the fridge right now. I could use it, but it just doesn't taste right on pizza to me. The fake stuff tastes right to me.

Last thing to prep is my topping. Whatever toppings you want are fine, but this is my new favorite pizza topping. A tiny clove of fresh garlic. Tiny because we're gonna eat it raw and raw garlic is super strong. Just a couple little shavings of lemon zest — the bright yellow part with as little of the underlying white pith as possible. And then a little bunch of fresh parsley. Chop it all up and you've got gremolata — the traditional last-minute garnish for lots of Italian dishes.

Chopping those three ingredients into each other really does seem to spark a chemical reaction between them. The result tastes like more than the sum of its parts. A last-minute sprinkling of that makes all kinds of things taste fresher and, I dunno, more sophisticated.

OK, the dough has visibly puffed up a bit, so we're ready to bake. You can simply top your dough and then throw the whole pan in a screaming hot oven. That's traditional. But what I do is a lot more energy efficient, it's easier to control and it gets you a much browner bottom. Heat on medium. And at the same time, I'll get my oven's broiler heating to max. That's the element at the top of the oven. It heats up in a flash, and I've got a rack positioned pretty close to it.

After a minute I can see the dough puffing up, and after four minutes I can smell it starting to brown. With my old method, I would start topping the pizza now. But the way I cook it these days is to completely finish browning the bottom before anything else goes in. You do it this way, and you can use a soft spatula to lift up the dough and see exactly what's going on. With the nonstick pan, you can just kinda shake it like an omelette to make sure it's not stuck, and you can move it or rotate it around if some parts seem to be browning more than others. With my old method you'd have to guess when the bottom is perfect. With this method, there's no guessing. Just cook it until you like the bottom. I like it just starting to burn. A little burning is part of what makes bread tastes like pizza to me. And there we are, so off the heat this comes.

Now there's no particular rush. I'll just smooth my sauce around, edge-to-edge — no bare ring of crust around the edge. The stuff on the sides of the pan will caramelize and go super-sweet. Dust on a little parmesan, or whatever you want to call this substance. It really enhances the flavor, and hiding it under the mozzarella layer keeps it from burning. Again, edge-to-edge with the mozz. Those bits of cheese touching the sides of the pan are gonna do magical things.

That's it, and under the grill this goes. Brits call it a grill. I find this pizza cooks much better and faster if I keep my oven door closed. Yes, people say you should not put teflon under the broiler. It could overheat and put off toxic fumes. Good advice, but this is only gonna be under there for literally two minutes. I've done tests with my infrared thermometer. The exposed teflon never got remotely close to the temperature at which PTFE starts to break down, causing polymer fume fever in very high doses. It never got close. If you can't risk it — or if you have a pet bird around — use cast iron. Birds are super sensitive to polymer fumes.

But I'm super-sensitive to pizza fumes, and this smells awesome. You just pull it when it's brown to your liking. Look at that crisp cheese on the edge, and because I used a nonstick pan, it's gonna come right off. I'll sprinkle on my gremolata. You want to let this cool in the pan for just a few minutes — just until it's solidified enough that you can get it out intact. The sooner you get it out to a cooling rack, the crispier the bottom will be. And look, with a nonstick you can literally just slide the pizza out like an omelette. Couldn't be easier.

Now that it's on the rack where steam can escape, you're safe to let this cool as long as you want before eating. I like to let it cool way down. Hey, look up! There, you can see that super-dark and even brown bottom. It's got nothin' I ain't seen before, though. There's no surprises here. I always hated my old method where you just had to guess when the bottom was perfect. Though say it's not perfect — maybe you didn't get it out of the pan fast enough and now it's soggy. You can very easily just re-fry this for a few minutes, basically until you hear it start to sizzle again. That'll bring the crust right back to life.

I've said in the past that I don't think pizza cutters are good for the home kitchen. I prefer using a knife, because a pizza cutter just tends to roll right off the edges of your cutting board. But with a pizza this small in diameter, it's fine. Cut yours however you want. I like small slices because they are so thick and so rich. The milk has made that crust a little bit cakey, in an awesome way. That is just such a great guilty pleasure pie. And look at the rim — those delicious brown cheesy bits. That actually has an Italian name — frico. It deserves its own name.

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Now go frico yourself.