



EATING

Detroit-Style Pizza Is the Motor City's Latest Export

Tina Caputo

3.6.14



When I was growing up in the Detroit suburbs, there were two kinds of pizza: round and square. The “square” variety was technically rectangular, a deep-dish pizza with a crispy crust and sauce on top of the cheese. Given a choice of shapes, I almost always wanted square.

After moving to California as an adult, I thought it was odd that pizza came in only one shape (round), but until recently, I never realized that the square pizza of my childhood was [unique to Detroit](#).

My pizza epiphany came during a visit to Texas a few months ago. My husband and I were exploring the hipster bar scene on Austin’s Rainey Street when we spotted a food truck called Via 313. (313 is Detroit’s area code.) Sure enough, the truck was serving up “Detroit-style pizza” to hungry bar-hoppers.

I thought this was a fluke until I learned that Tony’s Pizza Napoletana in San Francisco, locally famous for its regional Italian and American pizzas, also offers a Detroit-style pie.

Motor City pizza in Texas and California? Further investigation was clearly in order. How did this regional style of pizza originate, and why is it suddenly appearing in other parts of the country?

A crusty tale

It all began in 1946 with a Detroit tavern called Buddy's Rendezvous. Soldiers returning home from World War II had developed a taste for European foods, so Buddy's owner August "Gus" Guerra created a square pizza based on a Sicilian recipe. Because square pizza pans were hard to come by, he improvised with heavy steel trays used by Detroit's automakers to hold car parts.

Buddy's Pizza quickly became a neighborhood favorite, and competing Detroit pizza joints, such as Cloverleaf and Shield's, adopted the tavern's unique pizza style. Buddy's now has 11 restaurants in the Detroit area and still makes its pizza using Guerra's 1946 recipe.

Wesley Pikula, vice president of operations for Buddy's Pizza, described the defining features of Detroit's original square pizza. "We place the pepperoni under the cheese, in part to flavor the crust, and so it doesn't burn during the cooking process," he said. "We use brick cheese from [Wisconsin](#) (a medium-soft cheese similar to a white cheddar), and we place the sauce on top of all the ingredients."

The result is a pizza with a light-textured crust and caramelized cheese around the edges.

National recognition

More than six decades after Buddy's introduced its trend-setting pizza, a Detroit-style pie scored top honors at the 2012 International Pizza Expo in Las Vegas. The Pizza Maker of the Year award went to Shawn Randazzo, a Cloverleaf veteran who launched Detroit Style Pizza Company later that year. Randazzo now owns three pizzerias in the Detroit area.

Although that would have been enough for many restaurateurs, Randazzo has a grander vision in mind. Through his [Authentic Detroit Style Pizza Maker Program](#), Randazzo is helping entrepreneurs across the country introduce their customers to the Detroit style of pizza.

"My big eye opener came in 2009 when I entered my first pizza competition at the [North America] Pizza & Ice Cream Show in Columbus, Ohio, which had over 70 competitors from across the country," he said. "I was just a five-hour drive from Detroit, but I was the only competitor who had a square pizza with cheese to the edge. I couldn't believe it."

When Randazzo's pizza won the top prize, he realized that most of the world was missing out on one of America's great regional pizza styles.

So far nine pizza makers have completed the Detroit Style Pizza Maker program, and Randazzo has consulted for dozens of others, including clients from Thailand and Korea. Program graduates have opened pizzerias in Virginia and Kentucky, and one is currently setting up shop in Maine.

Making it right

“An authentic Detroit-style pizza requires a dough recipe that has a much higher hydration level than typical pizza dough,” Randazzo explained. “In bakers’ percentage, water content should be around 70% or more, which aids the fermentation process. The high water content also helps produce a light and airy crust.”

Pizzas assembled in the traditional pepperoni-cheese-sauce arrangement are baked at 525 F in seasoned pans made of rolled black steel. (The original Buddy’s pans were made of blue steel, but the manufacturer stopped producing them a few years ago.) If the positive feedback he receives from former students is any indication, the Detroit pizzavangelist’s efforts are working.

“I believe at the rate it’s been going,” Randazzo said, “Detroit-style pizza will become just as popular as New York and Chicago styles.”

Taking it on the road

Around the same time that Randazzo was wowing pizza competition judges in Ohio, Zane Hunt and his brother Brandon were cooking up a Detroit-style pizza concept of their own. In 2010, the Detroit-area natives rolled out their first Via 313 food truck in their adopted home of Austin.

“When I moved to Austin in the summer of 2009, I was on a quest to find foods that reminded me of home,” Zane said. “Brandon was still in Detroit at this point and we often talked about finding that one spot that served the pizza of home. He moved here a short time later and we ate at about 150 pizza places over the course of a year. Along the way it was becoming obvious that the pizza we loved in Detroit didn’t exist here.”

Determined to bring Detroit-style pizza to [Austin](#), the brothers began a trial-and-error process to perfect their recipe. “Our dough mixture changed more than 75 times,” Zane recalled. “We were like mad pizza scientists.”

Less than a year after they launched Via 313, they added a second trailer to the fleet.

“The response has been overwhelming,” Zane said. “Here we are in 2014 and the style has gained serious steam around the country. It makes us proud to know we’re part of spreading the word outside of Detroit.”

A San Francisco convert

Tony Gemignani, 11-time World Pizza Champion and owner of three [San Francisco](#) pizzerias, didn’t grow up with Detroit-style pizza. But he has become an enthusiastic convert.

Gemignani serves a Detroit-style pie at Tony’s Pizza Napoletana in North Beach, and teaches restaurateurs and home cooks to make it at his [International School of Pizza](#), also in

San Francisco. He's also launching a Detroit-style pizza concept at the D Casino Hotel in Las Vegas.

He first sampled Detroit-style pizza 16 years ago while doing a commercial for a Detroit pizza chain, and his interest in the style was rekindled years later by a student in one of his American pizza courses. Gemignani went back to Detroit to research the type, and ultimately added a Detroit-style pizza to the menu at Tony's.

When pressed by his students to compare Detroit pizza to other styles, he describes it as a sort of Chicago-Sicilian hybrid. But even that isn't quite right. "When it comes to the process, everything's a little different," Gemignani said.

The best way to show people what makes Detroit pizza unique, he said, is to have them taste it. In a recent class that included two die-hard New York pizza fans, Gemignani added two more believers to the Detroit pizza cause. "They were really skeptics about it, but then after they ate it they said, 'Man, this is [expletive] good!'"

He then asked the students how they would classify the Detroit-style pizza. Sicilian? Pan? "No," they said. "This is in its own category."

Editor's note: Black steel pans and pizza-making kits are available through the Detroit Style Pizza Company's [website](#). This fall, Tony Gemignani will release a cookbook that includes recipes for Detroit-style pizza.