

Cast Iron Pan Pizza

Allow us to reacquaint you with your favorite pie: thick, plush, crisp, and extra-cheesy. And novice bakers, take note: There's no rolling, stretching, or baking stone required.

≧ BY LAN LAM ≦

It wasn't long ago that pan pizzas were dowdy pies associated with chain restaurants, but I like to think that those of us who grew up savoring these thick-crust pizzas always knew they had more potential. And now they're getting their due: Respected pizzaiolas are finally giving these pies the same attention they've always lavished on thinner, more austere styles, and Americans are (re)acquiring a taste for them. Even Pizza Hut wants a better slice: The iconic chain recently revamped its signature pan pizza for the first time in decades.

If you ask me, the appeal of pan pizza is obvious. The crumb is thick, plush, and encased in a golden, crispy crust. The red sauce is thick and

has a bright taste. And there's plenty of gooey, stretchy cheese. My favorite versions include a rim of fused-to-the-crust fried cheese called *frico*, a bonus

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feature that's borrowed from Detroit-style pies. It's also the easiest, most home cook-friendly pie you can make. In my recipe, there's literally 1 minute of kneading and no rolling or stretching. And because it's baked in a pan, there's no dicey transfer of the topped dough to a hot baking stone. In fact, it doesn't require any pizza-specific equipment at all. Here's how it works.

A Crust with Contrast

What makes a good pan pizza crust so different from other styles is the distinct textural contrast between its crispy, golden, rich-tasting edge and its tender, plush, airy interior. One good way to achieve that soft, light interior structure is to make a high-hydration dough: The more water that's in the mix, the bigger the bubbles and the airier the crumb. I found that a ratio of 8 ounces of water to 11 ounces of bread flour (the best choice of flour for building structure in dough, since it contains more gluten-forming proteins than all-purpose flour) produced a dough that was supple but not soupy.

All that water came with a few other perks, too. First, it helped the dough come together really easily; all I had to do was mix it into the dry ingredients



The abundance of water in our almost no-knead dough (about 73 percent hydration) leads to a bubbly, airy, tender crumb.

with a wooden spoon or spatula. Second, it allowed me to almost entirely skip kneading as long as I let the dough rest overnight in the refrigerator. When given enough time, water can facilitate gluten development by helping the proteins in the flour find each other, enabling them to align and form the cross-links necessary for good structure. Third, the long fermentation in the refrigerator produced a dough with great flavor, since the cold temperature slowed the remaining yeast activity and allowed for the development of more complex-tasting acid by-products. (I did, however, need to start with warm water so that there was an initial burst of yeast activity to create lots of bubbles in the dough.) The upshot: As long as I kneaded the dough for just 1 minute after mixing, the water and the overnight rest did the rest of the work for me.

On to that crisp, golden edge, which forms as the pie bakes—or more truthfully, fries—in a well-oiled pan. Some recipes call for baking the pie in a round cake pan, but I opted for a 12-inch cast-iron skillet. I slicked the pan with a generous 3 tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil before baking the pie on the lowest rack so that the crust was as close as possible to the heat source. Using a cast-iron skillet allowed me to move the baked pie from the hot oven to the stovetop for the last few minutes of cooking; that way, I was able to give the underside of the crust a direct blast of heat without overbaking the interior or the toppings. (I did find that a greased round cake pan or pie plate was ideal for preshaping the dough before it rested; by the time the rest was over, all I had to do was press the dough gently into the skillet—no rolling or stretching required.)



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BUILD A CHEESE WALL



Frico—the lacy, crispy, browned cheese crust that forms where the cheese meets the side of the pan—adds extra-savory crunch to our pan pizza. To build a substantial “wall” of cheese that browned deeply, we used plenty of Monterey Jack (which was drier and thus better able to brown than mozzarella but not as dry and salty as Parmesan) and pressed it at least ½ inch up the side of the pan. (We deliberately refrained from saucing the dough all the way to the edge lest any sauce slip between the dough and the cheese and prevent the frico from bonding to the pizza crust.)

Cheese Two Ways

“It’s all about the crust” is an old pizza adage, but with pan pies, it’s about the cheese, too. There’s the usual top layer of gooey, stretchy mozzarella that you find on most pizza, and on the best versions there’s also the frico: the lacy, crispy rim of fried cheese that forms where the cheese meets the side of the pan.

Shredded mozzarella was great for the top of the pie, but I found it too wet for frico; not enough moisture evaporated by the time the cheese browned, so the result was tough and bendy, not crispy. I experimented with drier options and landed on Monterey Jack. Not as dry (nor as salty) as Parmesan and more neutral than cheddar, it crisped up into a rich, savory ring. The trick was applying the cheese just right: I sprinkled the shreds over the ½-inch border of dough I had deliberately left unsauced and pressed them up the side of the pan so that they formed a mini cheese “wall.” By the time the pizza finished baking 30 minutes later, it had deeply browned, crispy frico.

Bright, Thick, No-Cook Sauce

To offset the richness of the oil-fried crust and the abundant cheese, pan pizza sauce should be bright and fresh-tasting but also thick enough to stay put. I started with canned whole tomatoes and crushed them by hand in a fine-mesh strainer so that most of their juice drained away. (This would produce a thicker mixture than using commercial crushed tomatoes.) Then I turned them into a no-cook sauce by pureeing them in a food processor with extra-virgin olive oil, minced garlic, dried oregano, a pinch of red pepper flakes, and some sugar and salt for balance. The sauce came together in a flash and was packed with flavor.

CAST IRON PAN PIZZA

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS, PLUS 14 HOURS RESTING

This pizza bakes in a 12-inch cast-iron skillet. Weigh the flour and water for the best results. For tips on adding toppings to the pizza, see page 31. Use a block cheese, not fresh mozzarella, for this recipe. Avoid preshredded cheese; it contains added starch, which gives the melted cheese a drier, chewier texture.

Dough

- 2 cups (11 ounces) bread flour
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 1 teaspoon instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1 cup (8 ounces) warm water (105 to 110 degrees)
- Vegetable oil spray

Sauce

- 1 (14.5-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ teaspoon sugar
- ¼ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon dried oregano
- Pinch red pepper flakes

Pizza

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 ounces Monterey Jack cheese, shredded (1 cup)
- 7 ounces whole-milk mozzarella cheese, shredded (1¾ cups)

1. FOR THE DOUGH: Using wooden spoon or spatula, stir flour, salt, and yeast together in bowl. Add warm water and mix until most of flour is moistened. Using your hands, knead dough in bowl until dough forms sticky ball, about 1 minute. Spray

9-inch pie plate or cake pan with oil spray. Transfer dough to prepared plate and press into 7- to 8-inch disk. Spray top of dough with oil spray. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 12 to 24 hours.

2. FOR THE SAUCE: Place tomatoes in fine-mesh strainer and crush with your hands. Drain well, then transfer to food processor. Add oil, garlic, sugar, salt, oregano, and pepper flakes and process until smooth, about 30 seconds. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

3. FOR THE PIZZA: Two hours before baking, remove dough from refrigerator and let sit at room temperature for 30 minutes.

4. Coat bottom of 12-inch cast-iron skillet with oil. Transfer dough to prepared skillet and use your fingertips to flatten dough until it is ⅛ inch from edge of skillet. Cover tightly with plastic and let rest until slightly puffy, about 1½ hours.

5. Thirty minutes before baking, adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Spread ½ cup sauce evenly over top of dough, leaving ½-inch border (save remaining sauce for another use). Sprinkle Monterey Jack evenly over border. Press Monterey Jack into side of skillet, forming ½- to ¾-inch-tall wall. (Not all cheese will stick to side of skillet.) Evenly sprinkle mozzarella over sauce. Bake until cheese at edge of skillet is well browned, 25 to 30 minutes.

6. Transfer skillet to stovetop and let sit until sizzling stops, about 3 minutes. Run butter knife around rim of skillet to loosen pizza. Using thin metal spatula, gently lift edge of pizza and peek at underside to assess browning. Cook pizza over medium heat until bottom crust is well browned, 2 to 5 minutes (skillet handle will be hot). Using 2 spatulas, transfer pizza to wire rack and let cool for 10 minutes. Slice and serve.

The Perks of the Pan

A cast-iron skillet makes pizza easier, cheesier, and crispier than a baking stone ever could.

