

Pizza – You Never Stop Learning

They say you never stop learning in life and with pizza there is a lot to learn about this simple combination of flour, water and yeast. I've been making pizza at home for years and while I have been largely happy with the outcomes I'm always happy to improve my technique. My earliest efforts were with a quick dough, made in a little under an hour, as recipe books suggested but later I learnt that proving and resting the dough for hours, overnight or even a couple of days made for better tasting pizza. I was also guilty of rolling the dough out with a rolling pin, like so many recipes instructed. It wasn't until my nephew starting working in a pizza parlor that I took his lead and used my hands so as not to flatten the air bubbles created by the yeast. I also learnt from him some golden rules on moisture content and weighing my dough balls so each pizza was the same thickness. Now I'm a real pro at home-made pizza. If my lengthy instructions are not your thing watch my youtube, Let's Make Pizza, instead.

Part One: Pizza Dough

Enough for 3 medium sized 28- 30 cm pizzas

- 450 g bread flour (Caputo 00 pizza flour or Lauke Wallaby bread flour)
- 280 ml water
- 1 tsp salt
- 10 ml milk
- 20 ml olive oil
- 1 tsp freeze-dried yeast (Fermipan or similar)

How wet should my dough be?

Estimating the amount of hydration takes a little bit of maths.

volume liquid (ml) / weight flour (grams) x 100 = % hydration

Baking in the home oven, where baking times for pizza are much longer, 65-70% hydration is ideal (310 ml liquid/450 g flour= 0.68 x 100= 68%). If using a very hot pizza oven and therefore baking for a very short time then 60% hydration is best.

Milk and olive oil give a softer crumb but can be omitted. In Naples they don't add it.

MIX the salt with the flour. Mix the liquids together with the yeast and add to the flour. Mix with a mixer using a dough hook for 10 minutes. The dough will be sticky at first and gradually come away from the sides of the bowl. It is ready when it starts to form a ball. Dust your hands with flour and give it a gently knead, forming a ball and transfer to a bowl for proving. It should be smooth and silky in texture. Cover with a tea towel or plastic wrap smeared with a little oil to stop the dough sticking to the wrap when it rises. If your bowl is very deep you may not need to do this. Make sure you poke a hole in the plastic wrap to allow the yeast to breathe.

PROVE Leave at room temperature to prove for 2 or 3 hours. When it rises knock it back with a punch and a few inward folds (approx every 45 min or hour). You can do this in the bowl with slightly wet fingers to stop the dough sticking to your fingers. Prove overnight or longer in the fridge to develop more character if you wish. Just bring it out to room temperature and out of the cold bowl a couple of hours before.

WEIGH YOUR DOUGH BALLS Divide the dough into roughly 250-260 g dough balls; enough for a 30 cm diameter pizza. Place the balls on a tray well dusted with flour and cover until ready to bake pizzas.

Part 2 – Forming and Baking the Pizza

HEAT Heat the oven with the pizza stone if you have one. Place the stone in the middle rack of the oven. Heat to 220 C fan

forced with the option of using the top grill for all or the last 2 minutes of the baking time, depending on how hot your oven runs.

PREPARE YOUR TOPPINGS so they are ready to go. Just like a pizzeria.

The basics

tomato passata – in a bowl with spoon ready for smearing the pizza base

bocconcini cheese – sliced into a bowl.

Other suggested toppings

Italian style pure pork sausage removed from casing and pinched off into balls

skinned peppers

grilled eggplant slices or zucchini

zucchini flowers (great with burrata)

thinly sliced mushroom or tiny preserved porcini mushrooms

preserved artichokes

olives, anchovies, capers

N'duja (a spicy, spreadable pork sausage)

prawns

crushed garlic or confit garlic

Add these type of ingredients on top, once the pizza is cooked

thin slices of prosciutto

smoked salmon (great with capers and sorrel leaves)

rocket, sorrel or basil

extra virgin oil oil, particularly with garlic pizza

Don't go overboard with your toppings, remember less is more when it comes to an Italian pizza.

BRUSH TRAY WITH OIL Brush a quiche tray or a flat pizza tray with oil. Do this well as you need to be able to slide the pizza off the tray and onto the stone for the final few minutes of baking. If not using a pizza stone use a pizza tray with holes to improve heat penetration.

DON'T USE A ROLLING PIN TO FORM THE PIZZAS A rolling pin will flatten the dough, removing all the air pockets. Ideally you want a thin middle and a puffy, toasted crust; what Italians call the cornicione. (Where the word cornice comes from but hopefully it won't taste like plaster of Paris).

USE YOUR FINGERS AND BACK OF HANDS Watch my YouTube to see how to shape the pizza. Use your fingers to gently flatten and extend the dough. Lift the circle onto the back of your hands and rotate it, gradually stretching it outwards. As soon as you have formed the pizza place it on the greased tray and smear with tomato passata. Place cheese and your toppings on, avoiding the cornicione.

INTO THE OVEN Place pizza and tray on the hot pizza stone and bake for 4-5 minutes 220 deg C fan forced. Whether you use the grill at this point will depend on your oven.

After 5 minutes remove the metal tray using a spatula and a pair of tongs. Let the pizza bake directly in the stone for another 2-3 minutes.

Slide the pizza onto a wooden board when done, leaving the stone in the oven ready for the next pizza.

Eat Make Bake Repeat