



## Howie's Artisan Pizza

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### WHAT IS ARTISAN PIZZA?

The pizza arrives still steaming from the wood burning oven. The crust is super thin, with a black blistered crown, it is chewy and crisp all at once. The aroma of garlic and basil is dreamy. The soft, milky richness of the mozzarella yields to the sweet and sour finish of a fine sauce made from tomatoes, a touch of oregano, marjoram and good olive oil. The sausage is spicy but not too much, sweet but just a little, juicy and full of flavor with a licorice hint of fennel seed. Vibrant sweet peppers play against the bitterness of chopped broccoli rabe. Each bites sings. Each ingredient tastes so much like what it is. The flavors, so well balanced that even the subtle sour of the dough comes through. The textures are a riot of soft, crisp and everything in-between. Even if you didn't know that the fennel sausage is made from scratch with a Berkshire breed of naturally raised pork. Even if you couldn't care less that the tomatoes, the herbs, the peppers and the broccoli rabe are all grown locally. Even if I never told you that the dough is made with a biga that ferments for twenty-four hours, you would nevertheless know that what you just ate was marvelously delicious. Just maybe the best pizza you've ever had. This, my friends, is Artisan Pizza!

An Artisan is defined as a skilled worker who practices some sort of trade or handicraft; a craftsman. Artisan Pizza is then, a pizza which is crafted by artisans, often using products which are produced by other artisans, with the objective of creating a perfect pie. Perfection is, we all know, unattainable and trying to define what a perfect pizza is would be as fruitful as arguing the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. It is the pursuit of perfection that an artisan embraces and, in the course of that pursuit, products of extraordinary quality emerge. For those of us lucky enough to live in northern California, Cowgirl Creamery cheeses, Fra Mani sausages, Acme Bread, McEvoy Ranch olive oils, Sparrow Lane wine vinegars and world-class wines are readily available. One need only to consider how the availability of these, and many other artisan foods, more or less lost in America for generations, have re-emerged in recent years to realize that somewhere under the mountain of junk that fills our supermarket shelves there still beats the heart of the Artisan.

There was a time in America when all pizza was artisan pizza. Turn of the century Italian immigrants began making pizza at home, a satisfying and affordable food, reminiscent of the flavors they left behind. The first American pizzeria, Lombardi's, arrived in New York in 1905 with a coal fired oven and little choice but to use fresh, locally produced ingredients prepared from scratch at the restaurant. Today, artisan pizza is an endangered species in America. Fast food and chain restaurants have pretty much taken over the marketplace where some twenty restaurant chains account for over fifty percent of pizza sales nationally. Fortunately, there are still those who keep the artisan pizza flame alive. When one goes in search of artisan pizza, or proposes to seek out the best pizza restaurants in America, it is surprising how often certain names keep popping up. There is Chris Bianco in Phoenix, considered the master of the pizza universe. In New York there is Di Faro, Patsy's and Grimaldi's all carrying on the old school traditions of the 'New York Style', while upstart Anthony Mangieri keeps his faith with the old world style of 'Vera Pizza Napolitana'. In Connecticut, Pepe's and Sally's are most loved. In Los Angeles, Nancy Silverton and Mario Batali have recently opened Pizzeria Mozza (and it's the toughest reservation in town). In the Bay Area, there is Picco, Rosso Pizzeria, Pizzaiola and Pauline's. There are others, of course.

There are as many different styles of artisan pizza as there are pizza makers. Each artisan pizza maker has their own vision of what a perfect pie looks like, and that's a beautiful thing. Some pay homage to old world traditions, some to the new. Some pursue the traditional Neapolitan style with an almost religious fervor while others think inspiration is better found locally. A spirited argument still persists as to whether pizza was invented in Italy or in America. There is Chicago style pizza, a deep dish of gooey sauce and cheese; Sicilian style, prepared in black steel pans; and, of course, California style, credited largely to Wolfgang Puck. There are pizzas cooked in wood ovens, gas fired ovens and conveyors. Some are sold in simple neighborhood joints with just a take-out counter and a coke machine, and some are sold in full service restaurants with expanded menus, extensive wine lists and cloth napkins. They are found on city blocks, in shopping centers, in major metropolitan areas, small towns and suburbs. No two are exactly alike. Their common thread is an artisan spirit, an unrelenting attention to detail and a dogged determination to perfect their craft. Each of them suffers the vagaries of yeast, fire, seasonality and the restaurant business for their chosen métier. Each one could be working less, perhaps making more money by selling a lesser product, but none do. I am inspired by them all.