

PIZZA

Makes 1 12-inch pizza.

By Dennis W. Viau; my own recipe.

Every guy I know thinks he make the best pizza. I'm no different. I think of pizza as a conglomeration of some of the foods we best love—Italian sausage, pepperoni, mozzarella cheese, sautéed mushrooms, caramelized onions—you get the idea. I've been making pizza since I was a teenager. My early pizzas were not great successes. I eventually got the hang of it. Getting a pizza stone later in life really made a difference in my pizza. This recipe makes pizza the way I like it—thick and heavy.



Ingredients:

For the crust:

12 ounces (340g) by weight (2 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups sifted) bread flour or all-purpose flour

$\frac{7}{8}$ cup warm water (105 to 115°F) (41 to 46°C)

1 teaspoon yeast

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt

For the topping:

1 cup (264g) marinara sauce

12 ounces (340g) Italian sausage meat (3 to 4 sausage links with skin removed)

8 ounces (225g) mozzarella cheese, shredded

4 ounces (110g) pepperoni slices

4 to 6 white button mushrooms; sliced

$\frac{1}{2}$ medium onion; chopped

Oil and butter for sautéing

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon oregano flakes

Corn meal

Oregano flakes for garnish

Extra virgin olive oil for garnish

Directions:

Combine the dough ingredients and knead until smooth and elastic (5 to 10 minutes). Place in a greased bowl, cover with plastic, and allow to rise in a warm place until doubled in bulk (45 to 60 minutes).

While the dough is rising, prepare the topping ingredients. Place the marinara sauce in a skillet with about $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon oregano flakes. Heat to a boil, reduce heat to medium, and cook for several minutes until thickened, but not as thick as tomato paste. Stir it often to prevent scorching. Transfer to a bowl and set aside.

Clean the skillet and add butter and oil for sautéing. Sauté the sliced mushrooms until cooked. They will absorb fat; therefore, add more oil as needed if necessary. Set aside.

Sauté the Italian sausage meat until thoroughly cooked. Set aside.

Sauté onions until caramelized to a light golden color, 10 to 15 minutes. Set aside.

Arrange the pepperoni slices on several layers of paper towels and microwave 1 minute to reduce the fat.

If you have a pizza stone, place it on a rack in the middle of your oven and heat to 450°F (232°C) (see Notes at end). Let heat 30 minutes to 1 hour. If you do not have a pizza stone you can use a pizza pan or a baking sheet and wait to heat the oven until just before you are ready to bake your crust.

★★★★★

When the dough finishes its first rise, punch it down and shape a pizza crust large enough to fit on your pizza stone or your baking sheet. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise 30 to 45 minutes.

If you have a pizza peel and a pizza stone, sprinkle plenty of corn meal on the peel and place the dough on it. Open the oven door and slide the dough onto the pizza stone and close the oven. Let cook 5 minutes and then use the peel again to remove the dough from the oven. This first baking will set the crust and make it easier to slide a heavy pizza off and onto the peel. If you are using a pizza pan or baking sheet you can skip the pre-baking step.

Transfer the crust to a work surface. Spoon thickened sauce onto the crust and spread evenly. It should be a thin layer, not a pool of sauce. I place my cooked Italian sausage meat on top of the sauce, but you can put it on top of the cheese if you prefer. Distribute the sausage meat evenly on the sauce. Sprinkle the mozzarella cheese evenly on the pizza. Garnish with additional oregano flakes. Arrange the pepperoni on the cheese. Add the sautéed mushrooms and caramelized onion. (Sometimes I add chopped olives.)

Put a fresh dusting of corn meal on the peel and slide the pizza onto the hot stone. Bake until the crust is golden and the cheese just starts to brown, about 10 to 15 minutes. If using a baking sheet or pizza pan rather than a pizza stone, bake for 15 to 20 minutes.

Remove from the oven and let cool 10 to 15 minutes (to set the cheese) before cutting and serving.

Notes About Pizza Stones

How long should you pre-heat your oven and pizza stone? I can't find a definitive answer on this. One friend insists the stone should be heated at the highest oven temperature for at least 45 minutes. One hour is better. He likes a very thin crust that is cracker crisp. I prefer a thicker, chewy crust—one with some of the texture of bread. I'm satisfied with the temperatures in the directions above. I heat my stone for about 30 minutes. It is all up to personal preferences. Most of the Internet sites I found when Googling say 30 minutes to 1 hour. A few say longer.

Efficiency? How much cooking gas would you use to heat an oven to 500°F and maintain that temperature for 30 minutes to an hour, and then cook your pizza for 10 to 15 minutes? Some might think this wastes of our natural resources. Again, it's a matter of personal preference.

1. Do not put a cold pizza stone in a hot oven. The thermal shock could crack the stone.
2. Unless you have really good thermal mitts to protect your hands, it is best not to handle the pizza stone after it has been heated—thus the benefit of having a pizza peel. You can slide your pizza onto and off of the stone without touching the stone.
3. Some cooks recommend purchasing inexpensive oven-proof bricks rather than a pizza stone. Be aware that some glazing could contain lead, which is toxic. Use unglazed brick. If you're not sure about the contents in the bricks, play it safe and go with a pizza stone that is manufactured to be used with food.

There is an advantage to leaving your pizza stone in the oven permanently if you are doing any long-term baking. Once it comes up to temperature, the stone will help regulate the oven for a more even cooking temperature. For short baking durations, take the stone out. It takes longer to heat an oven to the desired temperature when there is a pizza stone absorbing heat.