



## Pizza

1 cup warm water (110 to 115 degrees)

1 envelope (1/3 ounce) active dry yeast

3 1/4 cups unbleached bread flour

1 teaspoon salt

toppings of your choice

*The key to good pizza is the crust. Once you have mastered the crust, the rest is up to your imagination.*

*Throughout Italy and France, you see pizza made in wood burning ovens. These ovens reach temperatures of 750 to 800 degrees. When the pizza is placed on the hot porous-stone oven floor, moisture is quickly drawn out of the dough, the pizza is cooked in 2 to 3 minutes, and the result is a wonderful crisp thin crust pizza, quite unlike the insipid, doughy pizzas that are ubiquitous in the United States.*

*We have found that it is not difficult to approach (if not duplicate) this result in your oven at home. All that you need is the right pizza dough, a pizza stone, and a pizza peel for transferring the pizza to and from the oven.*



In a small bowl, sprinkle the yeast over the 1 cup of warm water and stir gently until it dissolves. Be sure the water is between 110 and 115 degrees. Use a thermometer, or alternatively, learn to judge by touch: the water should be warm to your finger but not too hot—the temperature of a comfortable bath. Water that is too hot will kill the yeast, while water that is too cold will not activate it. When the yeast is mixed with the water at the proper temperature, a smooth, beige-colored mixture results. Let stand in a warm spot until a thin layer of foam covers the surface, about 5 minutes, indicating that the yeast is effective. (Discard mixture and start over with a fresh package of yeast if bubbles have not formed within 5 minutes.)

To mix and knead the dough by hand, combine 3 cups of the flour with the salt in a large mixing bowl. Make a well in the center of the flour and vigorously stir the flour into the well, beginning in the center and working toward the sides of the bowl, until the flour is incorporated and the soft dough just begins to hold together.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Dust your hands with flour and knead the dough gently in the following manner: press down on the dough with the

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heels of your hands and push it away from you, then partially fold it back over itself. Shift it a quarter turn and repeat the procedure. While kneading, very gradually add just enough of the remaining 1/2 cup flour until the dough is no longer sticky or tacky; this should take about 5 minutes. As you work, use a metal dough scraper to pry up any bits of dough that stick to the work surface. Continue kneading until the dough is smooth, elastic and shiny, 10 to 15 minutes longer. Knead the dough only until it feels smooth and springy; too much kneading overdevelops the gluten in the flour and results in a tough crust.

To mix and knead the dough in a heavy-duty standing electric mixer, combine 3 cups of the flour, the salt, and yeast mixture in the large mixer bowl. Attach the flat beater, gradually turn on the machine to the medium speed and beat until well mixed, about 1 minute. Replace the flat beater with the dough hook and knead at medium speed until the dough is smooth and elastic, about 5 minutes. Pinch off a piece of dough and feel it. If it is sticky, continue kneading while gradually adding just enough of the remaining 1/4 cup flour for the dough to lose its stickiness. If the dough is dry and crumbly, add warm water, a tablespoon at a time, until the dough is smooth and elastic. It is not necessary to knead additionally by hand.

After mixing and kneading the dough by one of the above methods, shape the dough into a ball and place it in a well-oiled bowl, turning to coat completely on all sides with oil. (This oiling of the dough prevents a hard surface from forming that would inhibit rising.) Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap to prevent moisture loss, and set to rise in a draft-free warm place (75 to 85 degrees- a hotter environment may kill the yeast) until doubled in bulk, about 1 to 1 1/2 hours.

With your fist, punch down the dough as soon as it has doubled in bulk to prevent over rising. Shape it into a ball, pressing out all the air bubbles and turn the dough in an oiled bowl to coat once more, cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate it until puffy, from 35 minutes to 1 hour.

If you cannot bake pizza within 2 hours after rising, punch the dough down again, turn it in an oiled bowl to coat once more, cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap, and refrigerate. The dough can be punched down a total of 4 times and kept refrigerated up to 36 hours before the yeast is exhausted and the dough is unusable. Let chilled dough come to room temperature before proceeding.

To make a 15 to 16 inch pizza, keep the dough in a single ball. To make two 12 inch round pizzas, divide the dough into 2 equal sized balls. If you wish to freeze dough for later use, wrap the pieces tightly in plastic wrap and freeze for up to 4 months. Before using, thaw in the refrigerator for 1 or 2 days or for a few hours at room temperature.

Second, the shaping of the dough.

To achieve a super-shin crust for a flat pizza by stretching, knead the dough for about 1 minute. Lightly flour the work surface. Shape the dough into a flat disk about 1 inch thick and lightly flour both sides. Starting from the center of the dough, press it out quickly with the heels of your hands, working around the dough to create the desired shape, usually a circle, until the dough is about 1/2 inch thick. Dust with flour whenever needed to prevent sticking. Stop stretching before you reach the outer edge of the dough, which will form the rim of the pizza.

Rest one hand on the surface of the dough. Lift up a portion of the dough with the other hand and pull it gently away from the center, stretching it as thinly as possible. Continue moving

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around the dough, stretching it until it reaches the desired shape and size and is between 1/8 and 1/4 inch thick. If a hole forms, pinch it closed. Now, rest one hand near the edge of the dough and use the other hand to push the dough against it to form a slight rim, working your way completely around the perimeter of the dough. Lay the stretched dough on a cornmeal-dusted pizza peel and brush all along the edge with olive oil. Fill and bake as quickly as possible.

To shape a flat pizza with a rolling pin, place a ball of dough on a lightly floured surface and dust the top of the dough lightly with flour. Using the heels of your hands, press the dough into a circle or other desired shape, then roll it out with a lightly floured rolling pin until it is about 1/4 inch thick, keeping the edges a little thicker than the center. While rolling the dough, pick it up and turn it over several times to stretch it. Continue to keep the outer edges thicker than the rest of the pizza and add a little flour to the surface of the dough whenever needed to keep it from sticking. Rest one hand near the edge of the dough round and use the other hand to push the dough against it to form a slight rim around the dough, working your way completely around the perimeter of the dough. Lay the dough round on a cornmeal-dusted pizza peel and brush all along the edge with olive oil. Fill and bake as quickly as possible.

Third, final assembly and baking.

Place a pizza stone on the floor of the oven (or, if there is heating element on the floor, on the lowest rack).

Preheat the oven to 550 degrees, or to the oven's highest setting for an hour to an hour and 30 minutes. It will probably take at least an hour for the oven to reach this temperature. However, even after the air in the oven reaches this temperature, the pizza stone continues to absorb heat, and it may take an hour and one half for the stone to reach the temperature of the air within the oven, depending upon the size of the stone. It is very important that the oven and the stone be as hot as possible before putting the pizza in the oven.

As noted above, make sure that you sprinkle the pizza peel with corn meal. This will prevent the pizza from sticking to the peel and allow it to slide off of the peel onto the stone.

Cover the dough with the ingredients of your choice. We find that traditional tomato based pizza sauces are too heavy; they mask the flavor of the crust and overpower the other ingredients. Instead try chopped tomatoes sprinkled with oregano, marjoram or other herbs. Unless you can get very good fresh vine ripened tomatoes, whole canned tomatoes (particularly, Italian canned tomatoes) are better; drain and chop them.

Mozzarella is the cheese most often seen on pizzas but don't limit yourself. Try a combination of mozzarella with Brie, goat cheese and grated parmigiano. Try chorizo in place of pepperoni. Other typical toppings include, olives, mushrooms, anchovies, Italian sausage, onions, and sliced red peppers.

Avoid opening the oven door more than is necessary. Each time you open the door, the oven loses 40 to 50 degrees of temperature. But remember, it won't take long for the pizza to cook at this high temperature. Check it after 4 or 5 minutes.

*Making great pizza is not nearly as complicated as the explanation makes it sound. After you have done it once, it is really quite easy and worth the effort.*