

Kenji López-Alt Spent 5 Months Studying Chicago Thin-Crust Pizza. Here's What He Learned.

Among his many revelations: a game-changing technique for yielding that crisp crust at home.

By J. Kenji López-Alt

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Some family members may call it obsessive behavior. I call it a gripping intellectual and culinary pursuit.

For the past five months, I've been on a mission to dial-in a home cook-friendly recipe for a thin-crust pizza popular in the Midwest, Chicago in particular. It's taken me through scores of iterations, furtive late-night pizza texts with other obsessives across the country, dozens of eating excursions (including a two-day, 12-stop tour of Chicago and Milwaukee), bags of flour, pounds of sausage and several gallons of tomato sauce.

Before we begin, it's worth considering the definition of "Chicago pizza." If you're not from Chicago, chances are you think of a cheesy, sauce-topped, wading-pool-sized deep dish. But if you're from Chicago, it is probably thin crust.

I'm talking thinner-than-a-saltine thin, with a shatteringly crisp crackle and just enough structure to hold its own weight against a heavily seasoned sauce and a caramelized layer of mozzarella. It's probably topped with hand-torn nubs of sausage, maybe a sprinkle of hot giardiniera. Forget the puffy, handlebarlike crust of a New York pie: Thin crust has sauce and cheese all the way to the edge — an edge that comes out extra crisp with a frizzle of nearly blackened cheese overhanging it.

Most notably, the pizza is round but comes cut into small squares, no more than a bite or two apiece.

Recipe: Chicago Thin-Crust (Tavern-Style) Pizza With Sausage and Giardiniera



“I’ll just have one more piece” is too easy to say around this pizza, especially when each piece is a bite. David Malosh for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Whether you call it party-cut, bar-style, tavern-style, Midwest thin crust, Chicago-thin or, if you’re from the Midwest, just plain “pizza,” with its small squares, it’s a dish that’s equally easy to share with a large group, or to polish off on your own. (“I’ll just have one more piece” is too easy to say when each piece is a bite.)

That square-cut shareability is no accident, said Steve Dolinsky, a journalist and the author of “Pizza City, USA: 101 Reasons Why Chicago Is America’s Greatest Pizza Town.”

With its roots in the 1940s at working-class taverns like Vito & Nick’s on the South Side of Chicago, the cheap-to-produce, thirst-inducing style was invented to encourage customers to linger long enough to order another beer.



Rose Barraco George, the octogenarian third-generation owner of Vito & Nick’s, a working-class tavern that started serving this style of pizza in the 1940s. Lucy Hewett for The New York Times

“That’s my father and my uncle, the first day they started serving pizza,” said Rose Barraco George, the octogenarian third-generation owner of Vito & Nick’s, as she points to one of the old family photos that line the dining room. By the pizza ovens, several of her grandchildren — the fifth generation to staff the kitchen — bustle about, rolling out dough based on her grandmother Mary’s original recipe, pinching raw sausage and cutting thin, charred pies served on aluminum trays. In the dining room, regulars grabbed squares of pizza under a ceiling trimmed with shag carpet; Old Style beer posters decorated the walls. The pizza at Vito & Nick’s is excellent, but the atmosphere, tinged with history, is superb.



The dining room at Vito & Nick's is tinged with history, with old photos lining the walls. Lucy Hewett for The New York Times

“Workers from the factories or the Union Stock Yards would stop at the tavern on their way home,” Mr. Dolinsky said.

The proximity to those stockyards led to cheap, plentiful sausage becoming a near integral part of the style, while the small square cuts made it easy to share among all patrons: No plates required — just a napkin would do. And best of all? “In the early days, tavern pizza was always free,” Mr. Dolinsky said.

Eventually, the free pizza became so popular that taverns started selling it to-go. From Chicago, it spread, becoming one of the dominant pizza styles throughout the Midwest.

What Makes This Crust So Thin



Less water and more oil make this crust particularly thin and crisp. David Malosh for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews.

Recipe: Chicago Thin-Crust (Tavern-Style) Pizza Dough

At home in Seattle, I started off working with a 2018 recipe, loosely inspired by Vito & Nick's, and published by my old colleague Bryan Roof, in *Cook's Country*. His recipe starts with flour, sugar, salt, yeast, water and oil combined in a food processor, which works well for two-pizza batches — any bigger and I use a stand mixer or knead by hand instead. It's then rested for a couple hours; rolled out with a rolling pin (professional thin-crust pizzerias use industrial sheeters); topped with a sauce, shredded cheese and sausage; and then baked in a 500-degree oven on a pizza stone for 10 to 14 minutes. It was a great starting point, especially considering that his recipe can be made in a single afternoon.

My friend Dave Lichterman, a Chicago native who operates two pizzerias in Seattle, began work on his own recipe to serve at his Windy City Pie. In one of the many tasting sessions at his restaurant, he turned me on to how dry thin-crust dough can be. Mr. Roof's recipe calls for around 56 percent hydration — that is, for every 100 grams of flour in a batch of dough, you'd add 56 grams of water. This is already on the low end for pizza dough: Neapolitan-style doughs typically hover just north or south of 60 percent hydration. But Mr. Lichterman was making his dough even dryer, around 50 percent hydration, with the addition of 10 percent to 15 percent oil.

This made a huge difference in the texture of my crust, which, up until then, had been coming out crisp but a little too flexible and tough. This had to do with the way that water and oil interact with protein in flour. When water is kneaded with flour, proteins in the flour unravel and untangle, forming a chewy network of gluten. In general, a wetter dough will form more gluten and result in a stretchier, chewier crumb, the kind you'd find in the inside of a sourdough boule. Fat, on the other hand, coats flour proteins and prevents them from entangling, resulting in dough that's more tender, like a soft brioche bun. Less water and more oil led to a lighter, crisper crust.

I tried using even less water but found that the dough became too difficult to roll out.

What Makes This Crust So Crunchy



At Kim's Uncle in Westmont, Ill., the team cures the pizza dough, drying it out, for best results. Lucy Hewett for The New York Times

My next breakthrough came when I accidentally overfermented a batch of pizza dough by leaving it on the counter for too long. Overfermentation severely weakens gluten structure, which can lead to dough that refuses to rise when baked. This is bad for bread but great for thin crust. I started intentionally incorporating a three- to five-day fermentation period in the fridge, which led to the thinnest, crispiest pies yet.

John Carruthers likes to overferment his dough as well. As the proprietor of Crust Fund Pizza, he has no restaurant, but he's made a name for himself delivering his tavern-style pizza in Chicago's back alleys in exchange for donations to local organizations. From his home, he baked pizzas with crackling crusts made from dough that had rested in his fridge for five days for me and Mr. Lichterman. (Mr. Carruthers's outstanding recipe can be found in my friend Andrew Janjigian's baking newsletter.)

Mr. Carruthers also employs a method called "curing" the dough, a technique I'd heard rumor of but had to see in person to fully understand. The idea is simple: Roll out the dough as if to top it, but then set it aside in the fridge for a day — completely uncovered — to dry out.



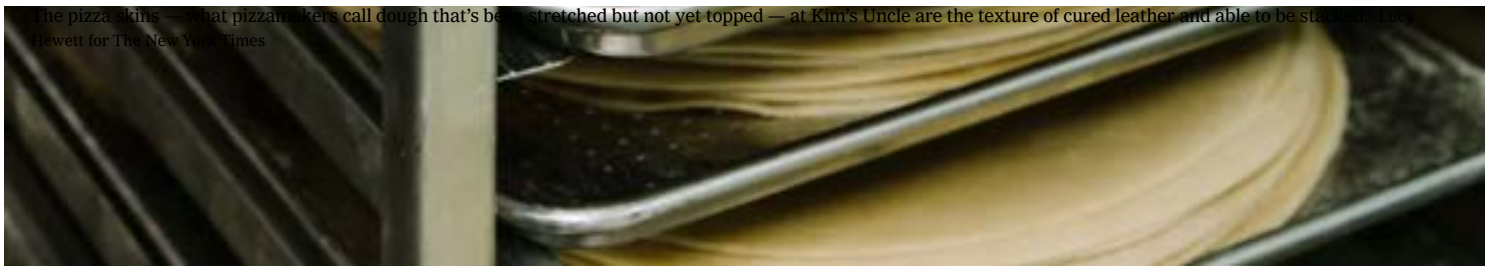
From left, Cecile and Billy Federighi and their partner Brad Shorten of Kim's Uncle, where the pizza is impossibly crisp. Lacy Hevett for The New York Times





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The pizza skins — what pizzamakers call dough that's been stretched but not yet topped — at Kim's Uncle are the texture of cured leather and able to be stacked. Lucy Hewett for The New York Times

Billy and Cecily Federighi and their partner Brad Shorten cure the dough at Kim's Uncle, a thin-crust pizzeria that opened last year in the Chicago suburb of Westmont, Ill. Popping open a stack of dough proofing containers in their walk-in refrigerator, Mr. Federighi revealed an overlapping stack of pizza skins — what pizzamakers call dough that's been stretched but not yet topped — that were dry to the touch, with the texture of cured leather. You can lift the dough with one hand, and it keeps its shape, flopping a little like an Acme portable hole from a Looney Tunes cartoon. The pizzas at Kim's Uncle, baked in an antique Faulds oven with four decks that revolve like the cars in a Ferris wheel, are incredible: shatteringly, impossibly crisp and flavorful.

Neither Mr. Carruthers nor the team at Kim's Uncle invented the curing technique. Mr. Dolinsky attributes it to Nick Pianetto Jr., who was the second-generation owner of Pat's when he started employing it in the 1970s at his father's Lincoln Park pizzeria. To this day, the pizza at Pat's arrives with a wavy, blistered edge, a sign that the dough was leathery before baking.

Back home, I rolled out 14-inch rounds of pizza dough and let them sit uncovered overnight in my fridge on parchment-lined cutting boards. I was stunned at how much of a difference curing made to the finished pizza's crispness, though, in retrospect, it makes sense. Dough becomes crisp as it dehydrates in the oven, and curing jump-starts that dehydration. By weighing dough before and after curing, I calculated that the skins end up with an effective hydration level of just 25 percent to 33 percent before baking.



Mr. Shorten with one of the doughs. It can be lifted with one hand and will still keep its shape, flopping a little like an Acme portable hole from a Looney Tunes cartoon. Lucy Hewett for The New York Times

Curing also has some wonderful side effects. The leathery disks of dough slide easily on and off a peel, making getting them into the oven a breeze. Cured dough doesn't sag as easily as fresh, which allows the pizza to almost "float" on top of the stone as it bakes, making moisture loss easier and crisping more efficient. It can bake to a dark crunchy brown without burning.

The only difficulty was finding space in the fridge to cure several 14-inch rounds of dough. I wondered: Would a room-temperature cure work just as well? Thankfully, it does.

A Fine, Fat Finish



Some sauces that top this style of pizza are very sweet, while others lean more vinegary. Adjust it to your taste. David Malosh for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews.

Recipe: Pizza Sauce for Chicago Thin-Crust Pizza

With the crust handled, I turned my attention to the sauce. In Chicago, pizza sauce tends to have an intensely savory flavor that comes from cooking down canned tomatoes heavily seasoned with dried herbs, like marjoram and oregano, and garlic (I like to use a combination of punchy fresh garlic and sweeter granulated garlic). Some sauces are very sweet; others lean more vinegary. You can adjust those elements to your own taste. These days, I don't bother simmering the sauce first: I find that it develops plenty of that cooked flavor during the pizza's 10-minute bake time, especially with the addition of tomato paste.

The last components to address were the cheese, giardiniera and sausage. Cheese is simple: shredded low-moisture mozzarella (fresh shredded and full-fat if you can manage, preshredded and part-skim work fine if you can't) and a sprinkle of Parmesan or Romano.

Giardiniera is the chopped mixture of pickled vegetables typically served on Chicago Italian beef sandwiches that has become a popular pizza topping. It pairs perfectly with sausage, and it's easy to find online. Look for Chicago-style brands, such as Marconi or the excellent J.P. Graziano, that pack the giardiniera in oil as opposed to vinegar or brine.

Milder than typical supermarket Italian sausage, Chicago-style Italian sausage is a true regional specialty, but it's simple to make at home. I chatted with Rob Levitt, head butcher at Publican Quality Meats in Chicago, about what makes Chicago-style sausage unique.

“The only real common through line is black pepper and fennel,” he said. This rang true after tasting and soliciting tips from other Chicago pizzamakers.

Recipe: Chicago-Style Italian Sausage



Look for a giardiniera that's packed in oil, rather than vinegar or brine, for best results. David Malosh for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews.

My sausage uses whole fennel seeds that I toast in a skillet, then roughly crack with a mortar and pestle — a spice grinder, food processor, blender or the bottom of a heavy pan will work — before mixing into fatty ground pork seasoned with salt, black pepper, fresh and granulated garlic, a bit of dried herbs and a pinch of red pepper flakes. The key is to knead the mixture (by hand or in a stand mixture fitted with a paddle) until the proteins begin to unravel and cross-link, giving it a tacky texture that turns springy and juicy as the sausage cooks, releasing its flavorful fat to mingle with the sauce and cheese as the pizza bakes.

Fermenting and curing your dough takes a little planning, but your active time commitment is minimal. If you start today, just shy of a week from now, you will wait the longest 10 minutes of your life as the aroma of oregano and caramelized cheese wafts from your oven. Your reward will sizzle as it comes out and crackle as you cut it into squares, whether you plan to share it or not.

I grew up eating folded triangular slices in New York City, but these days at my house, it's hip to be square, and thin is in. Of course, if you're from the Midwest, thin was always in. The rest of us are just catching up.

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