But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Who invented pizza?

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Jane 00:20
This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids, from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids like you, and we find interesting people to answer them. Going through all your amazing questions really makes me hungry. And so today we're going to give into temptation and grab a bite to eat. The food we're going to be talking about is something a lot of kids love. And adults love it too. So much so that this food might be aiming for world domination. We're talking about...pizza!

Jane 00:55
Do you think pizza could be the world's most popular food? We can't find any stats to prove it. But judging by how many people rank pizza among their favorite things to eat, it seems at least possible. You can get pizza in almost every country in the world in one form or another. And different cultures and communities take advantage of local ingredients to really make pizza their own. What's your favorite kind of pizza? While pizza may have originated in Italy, New York was one of the first places in the United States that pizza became popular. So we thought we'd put your pizza questions to a well known New York pizza chef and get some answers.

Frank Pinello 01:36
My name is Frank Pinello. And I'm the owner and operator of Best Pizza in Williamsburg, which basically means I'm in charge of all the jobs at the pizzeria.

Jane 01:48
Do you make pizza ever?

Frank Pinello 01:51
I make a lot of pizza and pretty often, but not as often as I used to make pizza. So in the first four, six years of us being open, I made every pizza here every day. So we would open at 11 o'clock in the morning, close at 12 o'clock at night. And there was only three of us. So I was the guy making all the pizza for everyone to eat. And as we started to grow, and the pizzeria started to, you know, become more notable, and we got some good reviews, we got busier and I was able to hire some really great staff. So now I have some really great pizza makers and young cooks in the kitchen.

Jane 02:38
In addition to making pizza, Frank is also a video star. He hosted an online show called The Pizza Show for Vice. So he's used to talking about this kind of stuff.

Belle 02:47
Hi, I'm Belle and I'm five years old. I live in Wisconsin. And my question is how do you make pizza dough?

**Frank Pinello 02:56**
Hello, Belle, that's a great question. So pizza dough is primarily made from flour. So if you've ever seen your family or friends make, you know a pie or make cookies at home, that usually starts with a dough, you know. For cookies, it's obviously a sweet dough. And for pizza, it's not sweet, it's savory. So we basically take flour, and we mix flour with water. We mix flour with yeast, and we mix all of that up. And then there's a fermentation process. So this is where the science comes in. Basically, the flour goes from becoming almost like a dust into a dough, like a playdough, which I'm sure you're all familiar with. And if you leave it alone in the right temperature, the flour will start to grow. And the yeast will eat the proteins in the flour. And it chemically changes the flour into a dough.

**Jane 03:57**
Yeast is a single-celled organism that exists naturally in the environment, and yeast is actually alive! So when Frank says the yeast will eat the proteins in the flour, that's not a figure of speech. Yeast is a sugar-eating fungus. But you don't have to go to the pet store to buy yeast; you can get it right in your grocery store. For baking, manufacturers take pure yeast and feed it molasses, and that grows more yeast. Then, they package up the yeast and sell it to people who want to make pizza dough or bread or whatever else you want to bake. Before we could buy yeast in the stores, people used the natural yeast in the environment. If you combine flour and water and let it sit in a warm spot, the yeast from the air, or already present on the flour, starts to feed off the sugar once the flour gets wet, and that grows more yeast. If you've ever heard someone talking about their sourdough starter, that's what they mean. Letting the yeast grow and multiply so they can then add that starter, that yeast, to their bread dough. But why would you want yeast in your dough?

**Frank Pinello 05:14**
Yeast is a is a rising agent or an ingredient that you use to help rise the dough. The yeasts are almost like these small little friends that you have that eat up the dough and help break down the proteins and the glutens. So in other words, if the yeast does its job and breaks down the dough, then when you have the pizza at home, it's a lot easier for you to chew the pizza, and then it's a lot easier for your stomach to digest. And that's something that helps a lot of us out. Because it can be tough to digest a big ball of gluten otherwise.

**Jane 05:55**
When yeast is breaking down that gluten, it eats the sugar and breathes out carbon dioxide. And that makes bubbles in the dough and the dough starts to rise with all those bubbles. When you bake the dough, those bubbles get trapped. And the finished pizza crust or slice of bread is fluffy and airy, not hard and chewy.

**Arielle 06:14**
Hi, my name is Arielle. I'm seven years old. And I live in Long Island, New York. And my question is, how do gluten-free foods rise, because my best friend is gluten free?
Frank Pinello  06:28
Arielle from Rhode Island, that's a great question. So the gluten-free doesn't have gluten in it, obviously, it's in the name: gluten-free. So rather than using flour from wheat, you have to use flours from different items like rice, or tapioca. And those are different flours that come from different ingredients, and they don't have the same makeup as wheat flour does. So in order to get a nice gluten-free dough, we have to add some other interesting products. And what we do here at Best Pizza is we make our own gluten-free dough. It's from 10 different flours. Some of the ingredients are, you know, brown rice flour, regular rice flour, tapioca flour, and we add in something called xanthan gum. And xanthan gum is an ingredient that you see all over all over the world and all different types of foods, and it helps bind the flour. So when we make our gluten-free dough, we're able to get a little bit of a rise out of it. So people that have celiac or are gluten-free, so they could enjoy pizza as well.

Jane  07:43
We've definitely established that pizza starts with dough, but so do a lot of other things. What makes pizza...pizza? Let's establish a baseline. Most people agree that pizza is basically a flat bread dough covered with some kind of toppings that is then baked. But how thick the dough is, how much crust is free and clear of the toppings, and what those toppings actually are, depends on where you live in what you like. And some people have pretty strong opinions about what kind of pizza is best.

Jane  08:17
There's a lot of debate over which style of pizza is best. There's thin crust, there's thick crust, there's deep dish. What kind of pizza do you make?

Frank Pinello  08:25
I, what we make here at Best Pizza and what we're known for is New York-style pizza. And although pizza was invented in Italy, I would like to say that here in New York, we perfected it.

Jane  08:41
So what's special about New York-style pizza?

Frank Pinello  08:44
Over the years, as the Italian immigrants came to New York around the turn of the century, you know, early 1900s, up until today, you know, pizza has been made and has been embraced by America, very much so. So the New York style was born out of necessity. It was a very inexpensive way to feed people. A lot of the bakeries in and around New York, are now pizzerias, including mine. So where we are right now, is at Best Pizza in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. And we have a big old hundred-yea-old oven that used to be a baker oven. And it was used to feed a lot of the factory workers on the water. And you know, once those factories started getting converted into apartments and so on, they changed from being just a bakery into a pizzeria, which became really the more popular food at the time.

Jane  09:43
Frank grew up enjoying pizza, but how did he go from a pizza eater to a pizza chef?
You know, I come from a family of immigrants. You know, my father came here from Sicily. And my mother's, you know, two sisters were born in Sicily. My mother was born here. So I grew up in it family that all spoke Sicilian and Italian. But they also were very amazing cooks. They didn't do it for a living; none of my relatives owned restaurants. But they cooked like they should have owned restaurants. So as a young boy, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother in the kitchen, and my grandfather, cleaning vegetables and making sausage and teaching me a lot about food. And as I got older and started working in restaurants, I realized there was a connection, you know, between my family and between this restaurant work. And I ended up working for a chef, as I got a little bit older, who went to the Culinary Institute of America, which is a French culinary school in the Hudson Valley, so a little bit upstate New York. And it's a beautiful campus. And it's a very strict school, almost like a military school, but for cooking. And that's really where I learned, you know, the nuts and bolts of being a chef understanding different cuisines like French cuisine, Japanese cuisine, Mexican cuisine, other than Italian food, which I grew up eating.

Jane 11:10
So Frank got that rigorous training in how to be a chef. And he says he uses all of those tools still today, even though it might seem like pizza is a really easy thing to make.

Frank Pinello 11:21
It is very simple. Pizza is, if you think about it, it's only three ingredients, you know. It's the dough, it's the sauce and the cheese. But the preparation of all of those three ingredients are very complicated behind the scenes. So it's simple in theory, and simple by, you know, just looking at it. But when you dig into it a little bit more, it gets a lot more complicated. And I would say the biggest thing is that pizza is basically a mix between baking and cooking, right. So in baking, there's a lot of science and math, you have to be very exact, you can't really play around with the recipes, you have to make the recipes as they are. And in cooking, you're able to kind of be a little more creative. You can, you know, throw different spices in, you know, cook at different temperatures. And there's a little bit more room for creativity. In pizza, it's a mix of baking and cooking. So my education at the Culinary Institute, or the CIA, as it's called, was perfect because they taught us baking and the science behind baking, which is very important in pizza. And then they taught us cooking and how important ingredients are and that all related to what I do.

Jane 12:41
Plus, Frank has had to learn how to be a business owner: hiring and mentoring staff, making sure customers know about his restaurant, doing all of the accounting and keeping track of money and keeping his equipment in order. It's a lot of work. But if you really love pizza as much as Frank does, maybe you'll become a pizza chef someday. Thanks to Frank Pinello for sharing his pizza journey with us. Coming up is pizza Italian, American, or global?
This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. We're learning about a food that is a favorite of a lot of kids and adults. It's gooey. It's cheesy. It's pizza! I mentioned that pizza is a food you can eat almost anywhere. But how did it take over the globe?

Valerie 13:30
Hi, my name is Valerie. I'm six years old and I'm recording from Sunnyside, Queens. And my question is who invented pizza?

Jane 13:44
To answer this question, we tracked down a food historian. Scott Wiener is another lifelong pizza lover in New York. He loves pizza so much that he even runs pizza tours of the city. Scott started out with the same question Valerie has.

Scott Wiener 13:59
The word pizza meant something very different in the 10th century than it means today. And it meant something very different again in the late 16th century than it does today. So that journey of the word is an interesting one. In the 10th century, it was this broad term that just referred to cookies and cakes and mostly sweet items. Nothing with tomato on it, because the tomato did not exist in Europe at the time. The tomato was brought over from Central America in the late 1400s, early 1500s. And when it landed in Europe, it was brought over by the Spanish and the Spanish, in the late 1400s and early 1500s, had a colony in what is now southern Italy, and what now includes the city of Naples, which is the birthplace of pizza. So the tomato landed in Naples only in the early 1500s. And we couldn't really have something that we all agree is pizza without the tomato being in the picture.

Jane 14:59
So, the word pizza, or the idea of pizza, is much, much, much older than what we think of as pizza today.

Scott Wiener 15:09
Exactly correct. It was a broad term that would gain some specificity in different parts of Italy. So in Naples when people started making these flattened doughs, with items baked on top, that became known as pizza Napoletana, the pizza of Naples. So just like if you like to make cookies at home, and maybe what you call cookies are just chocolate chip cookies, that's cookies to you. And then maybe you have a cousin who lives a thousand miles away, and their standard cookie is a butter cookie, with no chocolate chips, no brown sugar, maybe it's something totally different. They're both cookies. But that's the broad term, we need some specificity. A butter cookie is different from a chocolate chip cookie. And that's why pizza Napoletana is very different from, for instance, pizza Siciliana, Sicilian pizza. And so the term pizza is this broad word. And you need another word to help figure out well, what exactly am I talking about? What version is this?

Jane 16:19
So how did we get from pizza in Naples, Italy, to pizza in the United States?

Scott Wiener 16:27
It's really interesting to follow the history of pizza, because it's not like it started in Naples and then just spread outward. Naples is in the south of Italy. And if you go about two hours north of Naples, you find Rome, very big city, did not have very much pizza until the early 1900s. And even then, it barely had any until the 1950s. So pizza did not spread around the rest of Italy. And that's because Neapolitans were the ones who made pizza. And it wasn't until Neapolitans left Naples that the pizza left with them. And that happened in the late 1800s. There was a big push to move to places like New York City, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, New Haven, Connecticut, Trenton, New Jersey, and even parts of South America because they had factory jobs that needed workers. And those workers did not have to speak English. And southern Italian men who were farmers, mostly, realized that they could work in these jobs, make so much more money than they would make as farmers in southern Italy, and here's the kicker: they would be able to afford to eat meat every single week. And that brought in lots of southern Italian immigrants into the cities that I just mentioned. And that's how pizza spread. So all those cities got pizza in the late 1800s and early 1900s, whereas if you go to Australia, or Russia or China, you wouldn't find pizza until much later.

Jane 16:27
So how did it spread then beyond the United States and beyond where people from Italy and specifically from Naples were immigrating?

Scott Wiener 18:12
The big push after the spread of pizza around the United States didn't happen until after the Second World War. And that was this combination of an economic boom in the United States combined with the rise of media. Once you have radio and newspapers, and everybody's singing and recording songs that mentioned, oh, "If the moon hits your eye, like a big pizza pie," well suddenly that food spreads way past the places that make it. And in the 1950s and 1960s, there are articles all over the world that are explaining what pizza is. And one of the big events that helped spread it was the 1964 World's Fair. It's an event that happened in New York City, in Queens. And at that event, there was a pavilion for understanding the culture of India, understanding the culture of Uzbekistan, understanding the culture of Egypt. And then there was a pizza pavilion called the Mastro Pizza Pavilion. And you could get pizza by the slice. You could watch people tossing dough up in the air. And this didn't just introduce pizza to people, it introduced the concept of pizzerias to people who might have wanted to open their own business. And so the company that ran it also happened to sell pizza ovens, dough mixing machines, tables with refrigeration underneath. So if you enjoyed it at the World's Fair, you might think, well oh, this is a business that I could get into. And so the World's Fair in 1964 really exposed the whole world not just to pizza, or really to this New York style of pizza.

Jane 20:00
And the rise of global media, TV and now the Internet has spread all kinds of cultural phenomena from one place to another. Pizza is just one of them.

Hugo 20:08
My name is Hugo, I live in Burlington, Vermont. I'm five years old. And my question is, do all countries have pizza?
That's a great question, Hugo. There are hundreds of countries around the world. Here at But Why, we haven't checked with every single one of them to make sure they have pizza or a local dish that's pizza like, but truly, there are a lot of different types of pizza around the world. Some cultures like to put their own spin on toppings, like in Sweden, where they make a kebab pizza, or in France, where you'll often find an egg on top. Some countries especially in the Middle East enjoy flat breads that are similar to pizza. They're thin-crust with toppings that reflect the local tastes. In Argentina and other countries, light and airy focaccia, a type of bread with toppings, is a favorite. In Scotland, some people deep fry pizza. In Mexico, there's a type of pizza made with a tortilla, topped with beans and queso. And in Poland, pizza is made on a baguette and as a popular street food. I have personally eaten pizza in Nairobi, Kenya; Siem Reap, Cambodia; and Pisco Elqui, Chile. Even here in the United States, we have lots of local variations.

New York-style pizza is a round pizza that's quite large, 16 to 20 inches in diameter. It's cut into eight slices, usually. The center of the pizza is pretty thin, but the edge, the outside, the ring around the outside, usually it has a little bit of puff. And it's topped with a type of cheese called low-moisture mozzarella. It's the kind that you usually see shredded. And when you eat it, you eat it by picking it up, you fold it in half, and you can eat it while standing up or while walking. And that's why it's New York-style pizza because New Yorkers are always walking. And if it's a food that we need to sit down to eat, it's not right for us. Which brings me to Chicago deep dish, a very different style of pizza. It's usually two inches thick. It has a dense, brittle biscuit-like crust that has a lot of oil in it. And it's baked in these round cake pans. And the dough rises up the sides of the cake pans so that the toppings are more like fillings in a pie. It starts with cheese. Then you get your toppings, usually sausage in Chicago. And then the last thing on the pizza is sauce. So the sauce is at the very top, kind of unusual. Then there's Neapolitan pizza. Neapolitan is very small. It's usually about 12 inches in diameter. And it's very puffy on the outside, thin in the center. And it usually bakes in under two minutes. And it can bake that fast because the ovens are over 800 degrees Fahrenheit. Sometimes they're more like 900, 950 degrees, which is around over 500 Celsius. And so they bake so fast, which means the crusts are a little softer. You won't get crunch on a Neapolitan pizza.

Then there's Detroit-style pizza, New Haven-style pizza, California pizza, and whatever you like where you live. So with all of this variation is pizza Italian? Is it something we can claim as American now? Or is it something else entirely?

What's your favorite kind of pizza? Either style or toppings or both?

I don't think anybody owns pizza. And I don't think anybody has owned it since the early 1900s. I strongly believe that pizza is this food that even at its origin in Naples, it's made up of ingredients from all over the world. The tomato is from Central America. Basil and mozzarella are really from South Asia, from India. Olive oil is a Mediterranean product that's not specific to southern Italy. Wheat is from the
Fertile Crescent in what we now call the Middle East. So every component of pizza is not originally from Italy. But it came together in southern Italy. And it was this southern Italian ingenuity that pulled it together and made that original product. But today, pizza has become everybody's. So whoever is making the pizza, that style is theirs. And it's not even just a city or a state or a country or a continent. Sometimes it's really the people who make it. So as much as we know that the origins of pizza we're in southern Italy, I don't think it's an Italian food anymore it really is global.

Scott Wiener  23:51
I love a cheese pizza. I'll eat anything on a pizza, but a cheese pizza New York-style, that's the one that I can eat every day. And there are even some weeks when I do eat it every day!

Jane  25:03
Actually, Scott has a limit on the amount of pizza he can eat: 15 slices a week. That's a lot! What would your limit be if you were allowed to eat as many slices as you'd like? That's it for this episode. Thanks to Scott Wiener of Scott's Pizza Tours and to Frank Pinello of Best Pizza in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Jane  25:23
If you have a question about anything, you can send it to us. Have an adult record you asking? It's easy to do on a smartphone using an app like voice memos or voice recorder. Be sure to include your first name, where you live and how old you are. And try not to record in the car or a noisy environment unless your question is about that noisy environment. Then have your adult email the file to questions@butwhykids.org. We can't answer every question we get but we do listen to them all. The But Why team includes Melody Bodette, Kianna Haskin and me, Jane Lindholm. Joey Palumbo produces our YouTube Bites series. Go check it out. We're produced at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!