

Pizza Then and Now

Pizza is enjoyed by so many people around the world that many call it the world's most popular food. In the United States, pizza is a favorite dinner and lunch choice for kids between the ages of 3 and 11. Many adults love pizza, too.

Tracing the origin of a food can be difficult for food historians. Often they must piece together the facts with what they learn from cultural traditions and legends. When it comes to the origin of pizza, the story begins in prehistoric times with a pizza-like food that evolved over thousands of years to become the pizza we know today.

Early people who lived around the Mediterranean often made a simple flatbread. The dough was made by mixing flour and water. They would press the dough to make it flat and then cook it on a baking stone. Ancient Egyptians, Romans and Greeks enjoyed flatbreads sprinkled with herbs and spices. Some think the word *pizza* comes from the Latin word meaning flatbread, but the origin of the word is uncertain.

Pizzas like we have today were first made by peasants in Naples, Italy, in the early 1700s. The peasants added toppings to the flatbread to make fast, cheap meals that were easy to eat. Early pizza in Naples had toppings of tomatoes, cheese, oil, anchovies and garlic. Hungry fishermen enjoyed pizza for breakfast. In the sixteenth century, pizzas were sold in Naples by street vendors. The first pizzeria opened in Naples in 1830.

Pizza didn't stay a peasant's meal. According to legend, in 1889 the world's first pizza delivery was requested by the King and Queen of Italy. While visiting Naples, the King and Queen wanted to try some new food and ordered a variety of pizzas. The Queen's favorite was topped with soft, white mozzarella cheese, red tomatoes and green basil. To this day, that pizza combination carries the Queen's name. It is known as pizza Margherita.

When immigrants moved to the United States from Naples, they came with their pizza recipes. Soon pizzas started showing up in major cities like New York, Boston, Chicago and Saint Louis. The first US pizzeria licensed to sell pizza was started in New York City in 1905. As Italian-Americans migrated across the country, so did pizza. After World War II, pizza gained in popularity in the United States and quickly became a favorite food from coast to coast.

Pizza traveled to other countries the same way. When countries adopted pizza, they added their own favorite toppings. In Japan, the favorite topping is squid. In Brazil, the people like to add hardboiled eggs. Fried eggs are a favorite in France. Tuna is a favorite in Germany. Australia enjoys the combination of barbecue sauce, emu, crocodile and kangaroo.

However you slice it, pizza is a favorite dish worldwide. When made with a balance of nutritious foods, it can be a healthy meal for breakfast, lunch or dinner.