



PIZZA

It wasn't random that we decided to open a pizza place. We wanted our place to be fun. We think eating pizza with your hands is a lot of fun. The plan was never to bill ourselves as artisanal or to talk on the menu or out loud about our method and the ingredients we used. We couldn't think of anything less fun than that. We were just going to put some time and sweat into making our pizza really good. That was the plan. Once we got to a good place—a pliable, flavorful crust, a sauce that did its job exactly right, and mozzarella that was the perfect balance of creamy and salty—we started messing around.

We're not the first people to have messed around with pizza. There are more bastardizations of traditional pizza in the world than there are actual bastards. But we had some rules. We used seasonal ingredients because when you're looking around for good ingredients, they're usually the ones that are in season. We didn't put barbecued chicken on our pizzas and we never let anyone sprinkle brown sugar on one (every now and then someone in the pizza kitchen really wants to do that).

We like to think we never did anything just for the sake of novelty, and that the only pizzas that went on the menu were the ones that actually tasted good. That's probably debatable. But for the most part, as in so many other parts of the restaurant, giving experimentation in the pizza kitchen a wide berth paid off. The pizzas in this chapter are here because they are some of our best, and also because they're different enough from one another that each is an opportunity to learn something. But beyond these, we encourage you—it's mandatory, actually—to mess around.

THE OVEN

There is way more fear and loathing around making good pizza at home than there needs to be. It is not that hard to make good pizza at home. It is admittedly hard, if not impossible, to make pizza at home that's exactly like it is at Roberta's. That's because the fall before we opened, after waiting months and months for some Italians in some shipping port somewhere to get their shit together, a big, beautiful pizza oven arrived in a shipping crate on our doorstep. Or, to be precise, near our doorstep.

The reason you can't make pizza at home exactly like it is at Roberta's is because we have that oven. That oven gives our pizza its wood-fired char and wood-fired flavor. That oven cooks our pizzas so fast that the crust doesn't have time to lose moisture—it stays tender and chewy. You can't make wood-fired pizza at home (unless you have a wood-fired oven). But you can make really good pizza. Setting aside the degree of heat and how you apply it, good pizza is about good ingredients. You can make quality, flavorful dough at home. You can top it with sauce and cheese you made yourself and whatever other ingredients you like, hand-selected by you. If you do all of that, your pizza is going to be good.

The only other thing you have to do is not to listen to anyone who tells you what a fool's errand it is to try to make really good pizza at home. Don't invite those people to dinner.





MARGHERITA

tomato, mozzarella, basil

This is a classic margherita. As much as we’ve tinkered with the pizza dough over the years, we haven’t messed with this formula.

Preheat the oven to the highest temperature possible. Place a pizza stone or tiles in the middle rack of the oven and let it heat up for 1 hour.

Put the sauce in the center of the dough round and use the back of a spoon to spread it evenly over the pizza, stopping about half an inch from the edge. Drizzle a little olive oil over the sauce and scatter the basil on top. (We put the basil under the cheese so that the heat from the wood-fired oven doesn’t incinerate it. If you prefer, you can scatter it over the cheese, but we’ve grown to like it this way.)

Break the mozzarella into several large chunks and distribute it over the pizza. Bake the pizza until the crust is golden brown and bubbly.

MAKES 1 (12-INCH) PIZZA

1 (12-inch) round of
pizza dough (pages
000–000)

43 grams (3 tablespoons)
sauce (recipe follows)

Some good olive oil

4 or 5 fresh basil leaves, torn
into pieces

80 grams (2¾ ounces)
fresh mozzarella
(recipe follows)

[BABY
SINCLAIR]



* Lacinato kale is an Italian variety of kale that's also known as dinosaur kale, Tuscan kale, black kale, and cavolo nero. It has long, slim, dark green leaves and a less bitter, more delicate flavor than curly kale.

** These Southern Italian chilies, sold by the jar, are almost as salty as they are spicy, so taste anything you're using them in before you add more salt.

*** Prairie Breeze is an aged cheddar that comes from Milton Creamery in Iowa. It has a nuttiness and tang that we love, but you can use any good aged cheddar here.



CORN

'nduja, purple basil

SERVES 2

2 ears of corn

A spoonful of 'nduja*

Some good olive oil

Kosher salt

A handful of purple basil, small leaves only (Thai basil or mint will work, too)

* 'Nduja is a spicy, fatty, spreadable sausage from the Calabria region of Italy. We used to have to smuggle it in from Florence, now you can get it in the United States.

When corn is in peak season, it's so good you don't even have to cook it. You *shouldn't* cook it. See if the vendor at the farmers' market will take a buck to let you bite into an ear before you buy more. You want the sweetest, crunchiest corn you can get. If you've got perfect corn—like if you're happy eating it right off the cob—what follows isn't so much a recipe as instructions for how to plate.

Take the kernels off the corn. To do this, a lot of people stand the corn up in a bowl (to catch flying kernels) and run a sharp knife down it from top to bottom. But it's actually easier if you just lay the corn flat on a surface and shave the kernels off with the knife.

If the corn tastes absolutely perfect to you as is, skip the next step. Otherwise, cook the kernels in a very hot dry pan, giving the pan an occasional shake, for a minute or two—just until they give off a roasted corn smell, not until they start to color.

Take a generous spoonful of 'nduja and spread it across two plates; you're going for a wide band that arcs across the plate, so that you get a little 'nduja with each bite of corn. Dress the corn with a little olive oil, a tiny pinch of salt, and the purple basil leaves. Garnish with a little more olive oil, and serve.

PASTA DOUGH

MAKES 450 GRAMS
(1 POUND); SERVES 3 OR 4*

- 300 grams (2 cups plus 3½ tablespoons)
Tipo 00 flour**
- 6 large egg yolks
- 60 grams (¼ cup) room-
temperature water
- All-purpose flour, for
rolling the dough

* The number of servings here is approximate because it depends on how much pasta you want to eat. This dough makes four good-size bowls of pasta. You could also divide the same amount among three people without anyone feeling overstuffed.

** This is Italian flour that’s much more finely milled than American flour. It makes lighter pasta with a really nice texture.

This dough is for delicate pastas—pappardelle, tagliatelle, maltagliati, and anything intended to be stuffed. It’s light and eggy, and especially good with eggs from chickens that have been out foraging, which the free-roaming kind does from March through October. The yolk is more brightly colored and flavorful than it is in the dead of winter, and the resulting pasta dough is a deep shade of gold.

If you roll the dough into thin sheets—for this dough, no matter what kind of pasta you’re making with it, that means the thinnest setting on a pasta machine, or about 1/16 inch thick—lightly flour it, and layer it on a sheet pan between sheets of parchment paper, it’ll keep in the refrigerator for up to two days. You can also freeze it for up to a month.

Sift the flour (this is particularly key if the flour’s been sitting around a while or if it’s been humid). On a work surface or in a big metal bowl, mound your sifted flour and make a well in the center.

Put the egg yolks and a splash of the water in the well. With your hands, break up the egg yolks and begin incorporating the flour into them a little at a time (if you’re using a bowl, put a kitchen towel under the bowl so it doesn’t spin around while you mix). Take your time. Work the mixture with your fingers and gradually pull in more flour from underneath and around it, adding more water if the dough seems dry.

When the dough starts to come together into a mass, transfer it to a dry surface and begin kneading it. Push it, pull it, and push it back down again. Put the palms of your hands into it. Work the dough firmly until it’s one cohesive, smooth mass, about 10 minutes. Wrap it in a damp kitchen towel and let it rest at room temperature for half an hour. If





PAPPARDELLE

duck ragu

As good as meaty ragus can be, duck ragu is kind of king. You should have it once in a while. This one doesn't deviate from most classic duck ragus except for the fact that we lightly cure the legs to amplify the flavor, and at the very end, we spike it with a few shavings of very dark chocolate.

In a big bowl, mix the garlic cloves and thyme sprigs with the salt and 5 or 6 coarse grinds of black pepper. In a shallow glass container or on a sheet pan, spread half of the mixture in a thin layer. Put the duck legs on the salt mixture, and cover them with the remaining mixture. Seal the container or cover the pan tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate it overnight—at least 8 hours and up to 12.

Lay the rolled sheets of pasta on a floured surface and use a pizza cutter or a very sharp knife to cut them into ribbons 1 to 1½ inches wide. If you're using the pasta right away, cover it with a damp kitchen towel until you're ready to drop it in the pot. If you're not using it right away, lightly dust it with flour, layer it between pieces of parchment paper on a sheet pan, cover it tightly with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for up to 8 hours.

Remove the duck legs from the salt, rinse them, pat them dry, and let them come to room temperature.

Coat a big heavy-bottomed pot or a Dutch oven with olive oil and set it over medium-high heat. In batches, brown the duck legs well on each side, 3 to 5 minutes per side, and then remove them from the pot and set them aside. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons of fat. Lower the heat just a little and add the onion, celery, and carrots to the pot. Let them

SERVES 3 OR 4

4 garlic cloves, peeled

4 sprigs thyme

68 grams (½ cup) kosher salt, plus more as needed

Freshly ground black pepper

4 (400-gram/14-ounce) duck legs

Pasta dough (page 000)

All-purpose flour, for rolling the pasta

Some good olive oil

1 medium onion, finely chopped

3 celery ribs, finely chopped

2 medium carrots, finely chopped

340 grams (1½ cups) dry white wine

continues

[VENISON
SADDLE]



VENISON SADDLE

sunchoke, pomegranate, chestnut

- SERVES 4 TO 6
- 225 grams (8 ounces)
duck fat (see note,
page 000)

8 to 10 shelled chestnuts

1 (2.3- to 2.7-kilogram/
5- to 6-pound) venison
saddle, on the bone,*
trimmed

Some good olive oil

Kosher salt

Freshly ground black
pepper

4 sprigs thyme

4 sprigs sage

2 bay leaves

5 grams (1 teaspoon)
dried juniper berries

494 grams (1 pound)
sunchoke (also called
Jerusalem artichokes),
washed and sliced
¼ inch thick

1 pomegranate

There are rules about how venison gets to the table at restaurants. You can't just shoot a deer and serve it up. We get ours from one of a few game ranches in Texas. Deer and other animals live there a lot like how they would in the wild, and then they're hunted and slaughtered according to USDA standards. There are farm-raised versions of these animals but the meat isn't nearly as flavorful. Venison is beautiful meat, deep red in color with a clean, meaty flavor. The only way you can do wrong by it is to overcook it or bathe it in a bunch of fat or braising liquid. Just because it's lean meat doesn't mean it needs a lot of doctoring. Cook it until it's just rare. You'll understand what we mean.

Preheat the oven to 275°F. In a saucepan over medium-low heat, melt the duck fat. Put the chestnuts in a baking dish that's just big enough to fit them, and pour the duck fat over them. Bake for 1½ hours, until you can easily pierce a chestnut with the tip of a sharp knife. Remove from the oven and let cool. Take the chestnuts out of the duck fat, dry them off, and slice them into ¼-inch slices. Set the chestnuts aside. (You can reuse the duck fat if you add a pinch of salt to it and refrigerate it; it will keep for up to a month.)

Meanwhile, bring the venison to room temperature. Rub the meat with olive oil and season it generously with salt and pepper. Put it into a large roasting pan and scatter the thyme, sage, bay leaves, and juniper berries over it. Roast for 55 to 65 minutes, depending on the size of the saddle; 8 to 10 minutes per pound will get the meat to rare. Press on the meat with your finger; it should have some give. Remove the

saddle from the oven and cover it loosely with foil. Let it rest at least 20 minutes.

Increase the oven temperature to 425°F. Toss the sunchoke with a couple of splashes of olive oil and season them with salt. Roast them on a sheet pan until they begin to caramelize and brown at the edges and the flesh is tender but firm, 15 to 20 minutes.

In the meantime, halve the pomegranate and submerge the halves in a bowl of water. Using your fingers, separate the seeds from the flesh. Set aside half of the seeds. Put the other half of the seeds in a mesh strainer set over a bowl and press them with the back of a big spoon to extract the juice. Discard the seeds in the strainer.

To serve, slice the venison into pieces about an inch thick, figuring 1 to 2 slices per person. Arrange the slices on a platter, and drizzle with the pomegranate juice and sprinkle with the reserved pomegranate seeds. Arrange the sliced chestnuts around the meat and serve with the roasted sunchoke on the side.

* Since it's unlikely you have a hookup at a game ranch, a good butcher is probably your best bet. If they don't carry venison saddle, also called loin, they might be able to get it for you. Otherwise, you can order it online.

It's a sign of cynical times that we are often asked if our rooftop garden is a prop. We guess people ask that because, in the years since we built ours, rooftop gardens have become a cool and stylish thing for a restaurant to have. Not at all cynically, we are just as often asked how we manage to grow all the produce for such a busy restaurant. We don't do that. Not even close. At best, 10 percent of what's served at Roberta's is grown here. (The numbers are better at Blanca, next door, because it's a twelve-seat restaurant.) People are surprised and sometimes disappointed by that number. But the reality of urban restaurant gardening is that if the restaurant is successful, and if the garden is a garden, meaning it's vulnerable to pests and weather and every other fact of nature, it's impossible for that garden to supply the quantity, much less the quality and consistency, that a restaurant needs on a daily basis. The cynical guy might then ask, what's the point?

The first and most obvious reason, to us, to grow things is because we cook and serve food and because we have the real estate to do it. Beyond that, the garden is a laboratory for the many insane scientists we have working for us. If we want to harvest red mustard greens when they're tiny and tender, we can do that. If we want to experiment with an herb or an heirloom variety of a vegetable, we can grow it. Recipes and drinks successful and otherwise originate from rogue harvests. If something works, we can grow or order more of it. If it doesn't, we can scrap it. We can change the inventory every year if we want. The garden can be a magical place, where chefs can wander through and ask

