

#105 - The Lazy Genius Makes Pizza Part 2

Hi, everyone! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today, we're talking about pizza! It's episode #105 - The Lazy Genius Makes Pizza Part 2. Which means we had part one last week. We talked all about dough, and I went a little deeper than I expected if I'm honest, but the truth is I'm really passionate about baking and dough and pizza and all the things. I surprised myself with how much I had to say, and I hope you found my passion less annoying than more annoying. Be that as it may, we're going to dive into the next part of making pizza - cheese, toppings, sauce, tools, and how you bake it. I'm realizing I have so much to say that I could have an entire series or even whole separate podcast on pizza. I love it so much and keep learning every time I make it. The more you make it, the more you'll learn too which is a huge part of the fun.

So we're going to talk sauce, cheese, toppings, tools, baking, and time savers in that order. Let's start with sauce.

You can buy pizza sauce from a store and be in great shape; there is no shame in not making your homemade pizza completely from scratch. When I say homemade, I really just mean that you assemble it and bake it at home. Your dough could be from a local pizza place, the sauce is from a jar, and the toppings were already cooked from a little deli or grocery store salad bar. It's still homemade because you made it at home. So you don't have to make your sauce. If you want to make red sauce, I'll put a loose recipe in the show notes. It's basically tomato paste (Trader Joe's has my favorite and I've tried a lot), tomato sauce, garlic, olive oil, and some seasonings. Put it in a jar and keep it until you need. The longer it sits, the more the flavors become friends. I try and do a big batch on a Thursday so that I have some the next day and plenty for the week after, too. It lasts a good couple of weeks depending on the freshness of your tomato products. It's also a great dipping sauce if you have leftover crust or have breadsticks or whatever else. Again, recipe is in the show notes, but it's super duper easy.

Some pizza sauces are made with whole tomatoes that you drain and crush and all the things, and if you want to go hardcore authentic, go to town. It's a delicious way to sauce a pizza. Personally, I like the ease of the sauce I make, and I like a sauce with a lot of flavor since our toppings are usually pretty basic. It's nice for the sauce to have a pop.

Some of you have asked for sauce ideas other than classic red sauce. A couple of ideas are pesto or tapenade. Those are both full of flavor and only need toppings of cheese and maybe a roasted vegetable or type of meat. Super delicious and easy to spread right from the jar. You might have strong feelings about barbecue pizza, but you can use barbecue sauce as your sauce, use mozzarella and cheddar cheese along with some leftover rotisserie or grilled chicken, and you have a great pizza with basically zero effort. A lot of you like cream sauces, too. Alfredo sauce from a jar that you put on pasta would work just fine on a pizza. That actually goes for any jarred pasta sauce. You can totally use it as pizza sauce. It's sometimes a little more runny but not a ton and worth your having pizza in a pinch rather than not having it at all.

So homemade, jarred pasta sauce, pesto, tapenade, barbecue sauce, and anything else that sparks your curiosity now that you see the possibilities.

On to cheese. One of the reasons you have a lot of liquid on the top of your pizza after you cook it might be from those balls of fresh mozzarella that seem so fun and are but also release a lot of water. That combined with any grease from pepperoni or whatever else makes the center of your pizza a molten pool of liquid sadness. It can also make your crust soggy which is a bummer. So a way to counteract that is to use less fresh mozzarella cheese if you really want to use fresh mozzarella or the kind that comes in a ball. Aldi sells it. So if you really like that cheese, use less. Like, don't cover the entire pizza but only put on a few slices like you see in the fancy pizza places. Other options are to just use grated mozzarella from a bag because it has less water or a great option if you want a little more flavor is aged mozzarella. It has basically no moisture in it but fantastic flavor. Provolone is also another great cheese option that's a dry cheese and doesn't give off a lot of water. I actually use packages of sliced mozzarella and provolone like you'd buy for sandwiches and put those on my pizza when I'm in a pinch. I don't like to buy cheese that's already grated because they usually coat it with something to keep the pieces from sticking together. I'd rather take the time to grate or slice myself, but when I don't have that time, packages of sliced cheese are so incredibly easy, they don't have that coating, and you're guaranteed full, even cheese coverage. We also like to use grated Parmesan and/or asiago and/or romano. Any of those super salty dry cheeses are a great addition to your pizza before it goes in the oven or even right when it comes out. Any combination of those five cheeses - mozzarella, provolone, parmesan, asiago, or romano will taste great. Some other favorite cheese options are fresh ricotta. Have you ever had ricotta on a pizza? It's so good. You can totally use the tub of cheese you'd get at the store for lasagna, but I love to splurge on fresh and I mean literally freshly made ricotta from this little Italian deli by my house. You might think "oh I want an Italian deli." You might actually have one. A lot of times we don't notice places we're not looking for, so Google it. You might just have an Italian deli. I will go there for fresh ricotta, just a healthy scoop to dollop over pizzas once they're done or sometimes to go in the actual oven... depends on my mood. I will also sometimes get maybe a sausage or two to cook as a topping since Italian deli sausages are legit freshly made, and I'll also get something from the prepared food case like sautéed broccolirabe or their house roasted red peppers. Something like that. It's maybe eight dollars and worth every penny to take my pizza to a shockingly delicious level. Seek out an Italian deli. And they often have great cheese. You could buy a little hardcore legit freshly grated Parmesan to put on your pizza when it comes out of the oven and your life will be changed. Back to cheese though, you can also use cheddar or jack cheese - really anything can work as long as it goes with your toppings. And no pizza is terrible pizza. It's hard to put together a combination of cheese and sauce and toppings that's nasty. It might not be your favorite, but once you try, you'll know to not make that combination again. So just try stuff. It doesn't have to be perfect every time.

And a final note about cheese, don't feel like you have to add so much. I know the whole extra cheese thing at takeout places is fun, but you will often lose the impact of your crust and affect the way the pizza bakes if it's too bogged down by cheese and toppings. Less is sometimes more. Usually more. You could always make a pizza and put a little less cheese on half just to see how you feel about the ratios so you can taste side by side. You might be surprised.

Next, toppings. On an average Pizza Friday, we do pepperoni and then some with both pepperoni and sausage. There aren't a lot of vegetables to be seen, mostly because my husband and I like different vegetables on our pizza, and the kids don't want any. I can't blame

them and don't hold it against them. Pepperoni pizza is still a delight. But when we have people over, I try some different things. Whenever we have friends over for dinner for the first time, I always make pizza because it's easy for me and fun and feels a little special without being fancy. It also gives us something to do as we talk because I can only cook one pizza at a time. It's a nice experience to just all eat a pizza and talk while we wait for the next one. The rhythm is really nice. My favorite topping combos when we're going outside of pepperoni are number one: sausage, broccoli or that sautéed broccoli rabe from the Italian deli, red sauce, mozzarella and parmesan, and a few dollops of ricotta when it comes out of the oven. I might put a little fresh basil on top right out of the oven or even a handful of arugula if I have it. It wilts a little but doesn't lose its color or flavor. So simple, so delicious. And it's not sausage or broccoli in every bite. Remember, you don't have to overload it. Just a sprinkle.

A second topping combo I like is pepperoni, caramelized onions that are basically onion jam they're so buttery and sweet, sliced mushrooms that are raw since they'll cook in the oven and we already have some big flavors with the pepperoni and onion, and a little pesto mixed in with the red sauce. It's salty, sweet, earthy, and a little bright from the pesto. Really good and nothing crazy.

And a third topping combo comes from my friend Michael who I mentioned in last week's episode. He makes the best barbecue chicken pizza out there for sure, but he also makes one that you'd never think of in a million years that is shockingly delicious. You brush olive oil on the dough. No sauce. Then you thinly slice some apples - yes, I said apples - toss them with a little maple syrup - I know, hang with me, spread those out on the pizza along with some bacon, mozzarella, and gorgonzola. Bake it and then drizzle on a little more maple syrup when it comes out of the oven. It's sweet and salty and it has a tang from the gorgonzola. It's a delight. My husband, Kaz, is a middle school boy when it comes to pizza, and he loves Michael's weird apple pizza. It's so good.

And here's a little bonus tip from Michael, my pizza guru. He makes hot honey. He warms up honey in a little pan, adds in chopped dried chiles that they actually sell at Target now, any kind of dried chiles, and warms that together for about 15 minutes on the stove. Then let it cool and put it back in a bottle. He drizzles that on pizzas when they come out of the oven or by the slice. I haven't tried it yet, but he swears by it and I trust his pizza and cooking opinions wholeheartedly. If you try it before I do, let me know. Hot honey. It's the new thing.

Which leads me to our final word on toppings. A lot of you want new, creative ideas for how to top your pizzas. Hopefully these will give you some ideas, but whatever you choose, here are a couple of rules. Simple is better than everything. A pizza with just great red sauce, some good cheese, and a sprinkling of sausage is worlds better than a pizza with every single thing piled on. Using your Flavor Bible is a great way to get topping ideas, too. Just pick two or three things that go together and try it out. Keep it simple.

The other thing to remember is having contrasting flavors. Think about sweet, salty, earthy, and fresh all at once. So that apple pizza - the apples and maple syrup are sweet, the bacon is crunchy and salty, the gorgonzola is kind of tangy and has a strong blue cheese flavor. The mozzarella is super mild and just bind everything together. All of that in harmony is what it makes the pizza work. It's why my favorite pizza is sausage, broccoli rabe, and ricotta. The sausage is spicy, the broccoli rabe is a little bitter, and the ricotta is creamy and just a little sweet and rounds the whole thing out. Consider how things go together, how they talk to each

other. It's like, okay, hang with me, it's like you want a Spice Girls pizza. All the personalities represented well and singing together in perfect harmony. Amen. That analogy works, right?

Okay, let's talk about tools. Do you use a baking stone, a baking peel, what if you don't have space for either? Do you have to have one of those fancy pizza peels to slide the pizza in and out of the oven? There are lots of questions about tools and understandably so. Because I make pizza every week and know I love it, I have a big cast iron pizza pan that just stays in my top oven. I have a double oven, but the top one is just one rack and really skinny, and that's our pizza oven. The pan just stays in there. Michael uses a pizza steel, and my cooking sister Bri McKoy from oursavorylife.com uses a pizza stone. It's all about personal preference. I love the cast iron because it has handles, it's round, and if I were to pull out the entire pan and keep the pizza on it while we eat other pizzas, the pizza stays warm. But really the handles are hugely helpful. I'll put some links in the show notes, but I think that investing in something that can hold heat is really lovely in making great pizza at home. You don't have to though. A sheet pan covered in parchment paper will do just fine. You just won't get the same crust on the bottom as you might from a stone or steel. I think it's absolutely worth the small investment though. And I feel the same way about a pizza peel. I have two pizza peels, one for assembling a new pizza and the other to pull a pizza out of the oven. It helps me keep my rhythm and I'm not stuck needing to get a pizza out but not having the tools to do it. I just keep them with my cutting boards.

And let's talk about the big deterrent for making your own pizza at home - getting the dang pizza out in and out of the oven. Even with a peel, it can be tough, so here's how you get the pizza off the peel. You need friction between your peel and your pizza, and the best way to get that friction is with a combination of flour and cornmeal. Flour has better coverage, and the cornmeal adds some grit that flour doesn't have. Put a generous sprinkling on the pizza peel, spread it around to the edges, make sure that the peel is fully covered, and then put your dough on top. It's better to have too much flour than too little. As you put the toppings on, occasionally give the peel a little shake to make sure the pizza can still move around easily. If it gets stuck, don't panic. It just means there's not enough friction between the peel and the pizza. Use your hands or better yet a bench scraper, and lift the stuck piece of dough from the peel, then throw on another sprinkling of the flour cornmeal mixture and keep the pizza sliding around. It always needs to be able to move while you're putting toppings on, otherwise when you put it in the oven, it'll get stuck and you'll hate everything. I've experienced my fair share of accidental calzones where my pizza got stuck and flipped over on itself and I was like well this is what we're doing now. We're having a calzone.

Now what about baking. Unless you're baking a pizza dough that specifically requires a certain temperature, you pretty much always want to crank your oven as high as it will go. For most of us, that's 550 degrees Fahrenheit. Which feels hot. But remember that restaurants with pizza ovens have their temperatures go up to 900 or 1000 degrees. It's crazy. Pizza is meant to be cooked at a high temperature. Some of you mentioned not being able to get your pizza off the pan once it's cooked, and the likely reason for that is that you're not cooking it at a high enough temperature. It's not being forced to separate from the pan quickly enough because the heat is too low. So crank that heat high. In fact, if you're able to turn your oven on maybe an hour before it's time to put the pizza in, especially if you're sliding the pizza onto a steel or stone, you'll be in better shape because your stone or steel will have a chance to heat up which will make your pizza even better. It's not essential but man will it make a huge difference. So no matter your pizza, crank the heat high unless your recipe specifically says not to.

Most pizzas only take a few minutes to bake unless they're deep dish, but remember that different dough styles lead to different results. A Neapolitan dough is supposed to get a little charred on the bottom and sides. New York Style is better cooked to a golden brown; otherwise it gets tough and loses that classic crust sag it's supposed to have.

For cutting pizza, we have a regular pizza cutter, but using your big chef's knife will be fine, too. In terms of tools, that's it. Something to cook the pizza on inside your oven, a peel to get the pizzas in and out which is possible using an upside-down sheet pan and parchment paper but definitely not as easy, and something to cut the pizza with. That's pretty much it.

I already mentioned the high temperature, but to add to the baking part of this conversation, don't be afraid to change the order of how you layer the toppings on your pizza because different orders will bake differently. You can do cheese first which will protect the crust a little, followed by toppings and then sauce. It's actually quite delightful that way. Don't be scared. Again, bad pizza is still pretty good pizza. We worry so much about messing something up, but until you try, you'll never know what works. Try try try. And try some more.

So we've done cheese, sauce, toppings, tools, baking, and now let's finish with some tips and timesavers. I already mentioned one that I'll come back to, and that's to get toppings already made from somewhere. I love my Italian deli, but a grocery store salad bar is amazing. You can get exactly the amount you want without waste. A few cherry tomatoes, olives, grilled chicken, a little arugula to put on top, there are so many cooked options just waiting for you. Other timesavers, sauce can be made ahead of time. Dough can be made ahead of time and frozen. I talked about that in the last episode, so you can go back and listen to all of that. But you can totally freeze dough. If you're making pizza that night, put the dough in the fridge in the morning. Done and done. Really the thing with making pizza as quick as you can is having everything ready to go, so pick up a few ingredients already made on your way home, keep some cooked sausage in a bag in the freezer to throw on pizza straight from the freezer. It might feel like it takes forever because you haven't done it enough to feel confident in it and to realize that if you're trying to make everything from scratch at once at 4:30pm, you will only get pizza if you call Dominos. It takes a little planning ahead, and that's okay. The best way to be adjacent to homemade pizza without planning is to use frozen naan, jarred sauce, cheese, and anything else in your fridge or freezer that can just be tossed on. Bake it and call it a day. We do that often with meatballs - we have meatball naan pizza and it's great.

And that's it for pizza! I mean, it's not even close to it, but I feel like we've exhausted it enough for now. I hope these two episodes give you some great ideas and inspiration to make your own pizza without being afraid of it. You can do this! And if you haven't listened to part one, please do. Understanding dough is super important in making homemade pizza and your expectations of your homemade pizza work for you.

Okay, that's it for now! Thanks so much for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't! Bye!