

Of Books & Booze Episode 02X – Modernist Pizza

It's noon somewhere

Which means it's time once again to examine the intersection of alcoholic refreshment and the written word.

Welcome to . . . Of Books & Booze.

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to the show.

The idea for today's episode comes courtesy of my lovely and talented wife who said I should do a show on pizza – not just what to drink with it, but also about the different pizza styles.

Obviously, a great idea.

Not just because pizza is an excellent topic of discussion, but because we live in one of the greatest pizza cities in the world – Chicago.

So, after a lot of reading and drinking, here we are.

Before we get into the books for this episode, let's get into the booze.

Somebody I used to work with declared that the **Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** was the perfect pizza wine.

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is a soft, fruit-forward, red wine with a rich purple color, low acidity, easy-going tannins, scents and flavors of plum, black cherry, raspberry, a bit of clove, and maybe a trace of iron.

I like Montepulciano as a laid-back summer wine or with lighter fare.

But having tried several bottles by different producers on various pizza occasions, I found that Montepulciano's structure didn't hold up against my typical pepperoni and mushroom thin-crust.

So, I was – where I can often be found – standing in the wine section of my favorite retailer of fine liquors . . . and was struck – as will occasionally happen – by a moment of clarity.

Rather than search for a perfect pizza wine, it makes more sense to pair the wine with whatever is on pizza.

If it's a true Neapolitan Margherita Pizza, the Montepulciano is still a great choice.

If your pizza is loaded with sausage, bacon, mushrooms, onions, and bell pepper, try something with a little more chutzpah, like a **Spanish Crianza** or an **Argentine Malbec-Bonarda blend**.

If it's a white pizza, or – God forbid – a Hawaiian pizza – go with any of several different Italian whites – including Gavi or Vermentino – or try an unoaked Chilean chardonnay.

Of course, some people do go both ways, making beer the other alcoholic option for pizza.

Again, figure to pick something that complements your slice.

Pilsners and Kolsches are good candidates, as are light lagers and ales.

Rich, dark, fruity, or hoppy brews – like stouts, witbier, shandies, or IPAs – will clash with or stomp all over the flavors of the pizza . . . as will beer that somebody's inherently fucked with such as honey ale, sweet potato beer, or anything with gummi bears in it.

Try those with your pizza and you'll be wondering what the hell is going on in your mouth.

All that said, **in the glass today is the Prairie Path by Two Brothers Brewing Company out of Warrenville, Illinois.**

- Named after the Illinois Prairie Path: the 61-miles of rails-to-trails conversion bike path running from Maywood, Illinois west to the towns of Aurora, Batavia, Geneva, and Elgin.
- Beer style – Golden Ale, AKA “Blonde ale”
 - Lower ABV, in this case = 5.5%
 - Milder style that delivers a lighter, sunnier, and more effervescent beer
 - Some people refer to Prairie Path and similar brews as “sessionable” – but I won’t because, like “crushable”, and “verbage” it’s unnecessary and off-putting jargon
- Particular to Prairie Path
 - Crafted to remove gluten
 - Didn’t research the specifics of their process or the overall percentage of gluten that’s removed
 - If you’re interested in those details, email the fine folks at Two Brothers and I’m sure they’ll give you the low-down
 - I started enjoying this Prairie Path before learning it was gluten-free, but kept drinking it anyway because it’s good beer
- Container type – 12 oz cans
- Glassware – the trusty Nonic British Pub Glass
- Appearance
 - On the pour
 - In the glass
 - Slight haze that deepens the rich gold a shade just above orange-blossom honey

- Parchment-colored head rises high then settles to a nice, quarter-inch layer leaving a landscape of lacing along the glass while a few beads of tiny bubbles rise from the bottom
- As the beer disappears from the glass, the lacing stubbornly clings to the inside enough that pareidolia sets in to find faces in the foam
- The nose is sharply clean and crisp with restrained hoppy notes with whiffs of cold steel and sun-dried hay and
- In the mouth, the Two Brother's Prairie Path Golden Ale is rich but not heavy, bright but not incandescent with flavors like that sun-dried hay, lemon, and a hint of white grapefruit in the long and slightly bitter finish.
- This is what I've referred to elsewhere as a "one-minute finish": After the swallow, just pay attention to what's happening in your mouth and the beer will tell you what it's about
- In the final analysis, Two Brother's Prairie Path Gluten-Free Golden Ale is a fucking terrific beer
 - This beer delivers on any implied or inferred promise of being a top-quality brew
 - If somebody served you this there's no way in hell you'd be able to tell it's gluten-free
 - If it's in your area and you haven't tried it yet, go get a twelver after you're done kicking your own ass.

Along with the Prairie Path, I have before me a small, pepperoni and mushroom deep-dish pizza from the originators of the style, **Pizzeria Uno**.

We'll get into the official story of Pizzeria Uno and hidden history of deep-dish pizza in a little bit.

In the meantime, this thing deserves some analysis and commentary.

TheSpruceEats.com defines deep-dish or Chicago-style pizza as

“. . . a thick pizza baked in a pan and layered with cheese, fillings like meat and vegetables, and sauce -- in that order. The crust is usually two to three inches tall and gets slightly fried due to the oil in the pan. . . . [a]s the name suggests, the crust is very deep, creating a bulky pizza that is more similar to a pie than a flatbread. Although the entire pizza is very thick, the crust itself is thin to medium in thickness.”

According to Volume 1 of *Modernist Pizza*, “[Deep-dish] crusts can be divided into two styles: one is similar to white bread and the other [is] more of a savory pie crust, with dough that can be pressed into the pan.”

There are some pizza curmudgeons who declaim that deep-dish, as well as its bloated cousin, stuffed-crust – are not in fact pizzas, but rather forms of casserole.

However, the editors of *Modernist Pizza*, applying the scientific method, determined deep-dish to be one of eight distinct international pizza styles presented here in alphabetical order,

- California
- Chicago
- Detroit
- Greek
- Neapolitan
- New York
- St. Louis, and
- Sicilian

The crust of the Pizzeria Uno deep-dish is not breadly at all but more akin to a pie crust

- The outer edge is thick and crunchy while the bottom is not as crisp
- Bottom crust and sides are just under ½ inch thick

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- Cheese layer is just shy of a quarter inch
- And the top layer of tomato sauce is roughly a third of an inch
 - And for the record, yes, I did get out my digital calipers to measure all three
- Peperoni is peperoni, sliced thin but blanketing the sauce with full-coverage
- Same goes for the half with mushrooms
- Able to be eaten by hand, but need to longitudinally halve the given slices
- Mouth feel
 - Heavy in the mouth
 - Seemingly done all the way through so that if there is no discernable gel layer
 - Tomato sauce is sweet to the point of losing its tomato-y-ness
 - Too much crust so that it's practically the last thing swallowed
 - Not overly chewy – just a lot to chew
- Cohesiveness of flavors?
 - Not really
 - Pie crust dominates the overall experience
- Final analysis
 - This particular Pizzeria Uno Deep Dish hits all the advertised notes
 - And is an excellent example of the style
 - That said, I still don't love it
 - Too much bread throws off the delicate ecological balance of ingredients so that, to me, deep-dish pizza becomes more like pizza bread
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As for pizza books, many were referenced for today's show, including *The United States of Pizza* by Craig Priebe and Dianne Jacob; *Pizza: A*

Slice of Heaven by Ed Levine, and *The Ultimate Chicago Pizza Guide: A History of Squares & Slices in the Windy City* by Steve Dolinsky.

This last one seems to be an update and expansion of *Pizza City USA—101 Reasons Why Chicago Is America’s Greatest Pizza Town*, Dolinsky’s 2018 history and survey of Second City’s pizza joints.

Most books about pizza start with the usual info and oft-told tales about pizza’s history, ingredients, and styles; before becoming a guidebook to and critique of local restaurants, a book of recipes, or both.

But there are exceptions.

Pizzapedia is a 2018 book from 10 Speed Press with text and art by Dan Bransfield. Bransfield’s *bona fides* include art work for the food and dining industry, meaning he didn’t just pull this book out of his ass.

The illustrations for *Pizzapedia* are done in either gouache or virtual gouache via a drawing program; and have a fun, loose, and casual feel.

As effective as the illustrations are, the overall vibe of *Pizzapedia* is that it can’t decide whether it’s for kids or adults. Each page or spread features a pizza-related fact, but (in most cases) foregoes elaboration.

That said, *Pizzapedia* is a solid, illustrated Cliff’s Notes version on the origins, variations, and makeup of pizza.

More along the lines of what I wanted when researching this episode is *Pizza: A Global History* by Carol Helstosky.

Published in 2008 by Reaktion Books, Ltd., *Pizza: A Global History* is one of about ninety books in The Edible Series dedicated to food and food-adjacent consumables, such as:

- Pancakes
- Ice Cream

- Soda and Fizzy Drinks
- Edible Insects
- Breakfast Cereal
- Pie,
- And multiple books on alcoholic beverages

I really like *Pizza: A Global History* because Helstosky doesn't bog down her narrative with justifications or battle cries for whose pizza is best, and bypasses the *outré* recipes.

Helstosky's overview of how and why pizza achieved its status as the world's favorite food includes analysis of pizza's various roles – not just as food, but also its meaning and status in different cultures and economic strata.

Pizza: A Global History is a slim – but by no means slight – 142 pages.

The first 111 are dedicated to the past, present, and future of pizza . . . and only then comes a double-handful of recipes – which are, more than anything, a nod to convention rather than an effort to turn it into any kind of cookbook.

Pizza: A Global History is a quick and thoughtful read that's definitely worth your time.

This seems like a good time for a short break.

Take a listen to some good people doing good things, and we'll be right back.

[INSERT PSA's]

When it comes to books about pizza, the *ne plus ultra* is *Modernist Pizza* – a three volume, hardcover collection of the finest pizza porn available today, and probably ever.

Published in 2021 by the Cooking Lab out of Bellvue, Washington, *Modernist Pizza* was created for home-based cooks and seasoned pizzaioli – the official term for professional pizza-mongers.

- Volume One covers pizza History and Fundamentals
- Volume Two digs deep into Techniques and Ingredients
- Volume Three is dedicated to Recipes

Each volume is a four-hundred-ish page hardcover beautifully put together with informative text and stunning photos of not just pizza but also the people, places, and tools important to the history and future of the world's favorite food.

And just when you thought it couldn't get better, this a sexy beast comes in a hot-rod-red enameled, stainless-steel slipcase that also contains a fourth book: the *Modernist Pizza Kitchen Manual*.

Complete with spiral binding and plastic covers, the *Kitchen Manual* gets to the bedrock of pizza-craft by compiling and logically organizing all of the critical material found in Volumes 1 through 3, but without photos.

The *Kitchen Manual's* chapters are broken into seemingly innocuous themes, such as "Cheese", "Sauce", and "Toppings" which belie the technicalities and meaningful minutiae of the underlying material.

Here are a sample of subsection headings from Chapter 6: Making Pizza Dough –

- How to set up a triangle test
- How to mix using the double hydration mixing method

- How to incorporate inclusions by machine, and
- How to preform dough CPR

The recipes in the *Kitchen Manual* are well-formatted and easy to read.

Ingredients are given in metric weight for more exacting measurements, as well as by volume for those who prefer to cook by cup and spoon sizes.

With the sturdy plastic covers and spiral binding, the *Kitchen Manual* is designed to be ready for work in even the busiest cook space.

My initial beef with the publishers *vis-à-vis* the *Kitchen Manual* was that they seemed to have skimmed on the quality of its interior pages, which feel significantly flimsier than the paper stock for the other books.

But – on closer examination, the *Kitchen Manual* appears to be printed on a light-weight plastic that will be resistant to sticky fingers or a splash of sauce, and can withstand a decade or more of steady use.

Well done, Cooking Lab!

Unlike the other field guides and recipe books on the topic, and adding to the encyclopedic nature of this project, all of the recipes in *Modernist Pizza* have been kitchen-tested and via different cooking methods – gas oven, wood-fired oven, impinger ovens, even frying.

As such, the *Kitchen Manual* includes a chapter on how to bake pizza in various oven types, along with recommendations as to which kinds of dough work better or best in that oven.

One last thing about *Modernist Pizza* in general:

All this awesomeness comes at a price – but you get what you pay for.

[MSRP for the set is \\$425.00](#) and is available through the Modernist Cuisine website.

It's also available on Amazon.com for 31% off or used for a little under \$300 dollars, which is a steal.

If I was a pizza maker, at-home or professionally, spending \$400 bucks on this collection would be a quality investment with substantial ROI for person and **craft**.

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Getting back to *Modernist Pizza Volume One: History and Fundamentals*, I was mainly interested in Chapters 1 and 2, and part of Chapter 3.

Chapter One, "History of Pizza", defines what pizza is and isn't; details its origins, history, and evolution from peasant foot to haute cuisine; and pizza's spread across the US and the world.

Chapter Two gets into different pizza styles – e.g., deep dish, Detroit, South American Thin Crust, Neapolitan, and so on.

Along the way, readers and eaters learn pizza-specific nomenclature that help them understand, and be able to convey, why a particular pizza maybe good, bad, adequate, or great.

An excellent example of this is something called the "gel-layer problem."

The gel-layer appears between the top of the crust and the bottom of the sauce as a "white, doughy, and gummy line".

This isn't from a too-wet sauce soaking into the crust. It's thanks an undercooked crust – and is typical for deep-dish pizzas.

The gel-layer problem is first noted in Chapter 2, but explored to resolution in Chapter 5.

Chapter Two also discusses at length a phenomenon referred to by Chicago food writer, Steve Dolinsky, as PIGUE [PIE-GOO] Syndrome.

Pizza City USA, Dolinsky states:

["Pizza I Grew Up Eating" Syndrome is] the result of countless birthday parties, special events, and high-school sleepovers [that] somehow attaches itself to the frontal cortex PIGUE affects everyone.

What this leads to is an unshakable bias for the pizza people have been eating – or subjected to – for years.

Never mind that the crust is always burnt; or the pizza is under-cooked, soggy, or riddled with a half-dozen other faults . . . if that's what somebody is used to, that's the pizza-shaped hill they will die on.

Also, *Modernist Pizza* references a 2019 VICE article in which author Peter Rugg delves into this logical and gustatory fallacy entitled, "[The Pain and Sorrow of Learning Your Beloved Childhood Pizza Is Trash.](#)"

See the show notes for a link to Mr. Rugg's lament.

Although I have suffered – and still occasionally present – many delusions, I remain arrogant enough to aver avoiding PIGUE Syndrome.

My parents didn't order us much pizza, so I never developed an affinity for any particular shop.

As for the pizza I could afford on my own or with friends, I was fully aware that it was shitty, corporate, assembly-line fare.

But to paraphrase the great David Mamet: "Everybody *likes* pizza. That's why they call it 'pizza.'"

Modernist Pizza, Volume One, Chapter Three, "Pizza Travels" serves as a kind of travelogue covering the authors' journeys and adventures around Planet Pizza.

" . . . we flew from our home base in Seattle to key pizza locals in the United States. We went to six different regions in Italy. We visited Bueno Aires, Sao Palo, and Tokyo We decided it was the only way to give the full picture. . . . We undertook this world tour to help us understand [pizza] diversity and learn from the local pros."

Of course, one of the stops along their way was sweet home, Chicago.

Regarding Chicago, they state, "You can get all kinds of pizza in the Windy City . . . but what most people talk about is 'Chicago-style pizza', a deep-dish pie that was born at Pizzeria Uno decades ago. It's the first truly original pizza style invented in the United States. . . ."

In his 2021 book *The Ultimate Chicago Pizza Guide: A History Of Squares & Slices In The Windy City*, Steve Dolinski makes the case that official "Chicago pizza" isn't deep-dish, but rather the thin-crust, sauce-to-the edge, square-cut standard that is the default when ordering a pizza within the city limits or the collar counties.

Per *Moderist Pizza*, Dolinski's Chicago pizza is not different enough for its own category, but is a sub-style of the good ol' thin-crust – and I have to agree.

Just because Chicagoans cut our pizzas differently than the rest of the country, or the world, doesn't mean that's its own style.

That's like saying, "My vodka and vermouth comes in a rocks glass with a bit of ice instead of in a conical piece of stemware minus the ice – therefore my martini *isn't* a martini."

Anyway, legend has it that deep-dish pizza's genealogy can be traced back to the mid-1940s and the original Pizzeria Uno at 29 East Ohio Street, at the corner of Ohio and Wabash, two blocks west of the Magnificent Mile.

This maybe the story Chicagoans tell when tucking themselves into bed at night, however, there is no confirmed date for when Pizzeria Uno – or any other Chicago joint – started slinging deep dish.

According to Chicago cultural historian Tim Samuelson via Wikipedia, "there is not enough documentation to determine with certainty who invented Chicago-style deep-dish pizza."

That said, the authors of *Modernist Pizza* attempt a their own bit of armchair detection trying to answer, "Who Invented Deep-Dish Pizza– and When?"

The story told by Pizzeria Uno co-founder, Ike Sewell, is that he and his partner, Richard Novaretti, "started experimenting" and eventually came up with deep dish.

The authors of *Modernist Pizza* consider, "the idea that these two invented [it] is a bit of a stretch. It's much more likely that an employee

came up with the recipe – specifically . . . Alice Mae Redmond, [an African-American woman who] worked in Uno’s kitchen for about 17 years.”

In a 1989 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Ms. Redmond said that when she started working for Pizzeria Uno on an unspecified date, the dough was, “too hard to push,” and that she “had to make that crust better.”

Based on baking science and bread-making experience, the *Modernist Pizza* crew conclude Ms. Redmond added some kind of conditioner to the dough to make it more malleable, but nobody can say exactly what it was since she never let the secret slip to the public.

As with all undocumented history, the truth is likely somewhere in the middle.

Sewell and Novaretti may have worked out the basics of a modified pan pizza, but Redmond’s daily hands-on experimentation led to the necessary refinements in perfecting a new pizza style.

Whenever it may have first hit checkered table cloths and open gullets, for decades after, deep-dish pizza stayed exclusive to Chicago so that only city-dwellers and the suburban cognoscenti could get their mouths around a mighty slice.

This lasted until the late 1970s when Sewell finally agreed to franchise his restaurants because he feared former Pizzeria Uno employees, who had since become competitors, were stealing his idea. . . because they were.

Currently, Chicago deep-dish can be ordered from a variety of local pizza purveyors or shipped frozen nation-wide.

While there's a lot more that can be said about Chicago deep-dish, *Modernist Pizza*, and pizza in general, I'll leave you with this closing thought.

In the introductory pages of *Modernist Pizza: Volume One*, the authors throw down the gauntlet that the top pizza city in the United States – “and arguably the world” – is, of all places, Portland, Oregon.

The authors state that, even though “there is no defined Portland-style,” they were “blown away” at Stumptown’s “stunningly-creative pizzas.”

They conclude that Portland’s success lies in the physical and philosophical distances separating the City of Roses from the primary pizza thraldoms.

This distance frees local pizzaioli of any “particular style that dominates . . . in the same way that New York or Chicago pizzerias sometimes do.”

Being as Portland is unofficially known as “Beer-vana,” it looks like a trip is in order for some amazing pizza and a pint or three.

Until I get there, here’s a toast to Portland, Oregon – America’s greatest pizza town: Keep it weird, my friends.

That’s it for the show, but there’s plenty more to know.

For information on the books, booze, or other material referenced, take a look at the show notes for this episode.

Any book suggestions, booze suggestions, comments, queries, or sponsorship offers can be emailed to my producer, Chauncey, at *Of Books And Booze At Gmail Dot Com*.

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This is Bradley Weber saying thanks for listening and reminding you to:

Shop local,

read local,

drink local,

tip your servers,

drink but never drive–

then get up and do it all again tomorrow.

See you next time.

