

The Restless Quest for a Better Frozen Pizza

As shoppers flock to the freezer aisle, artisan pizzaiolos are using new tech and express shipping to give them pies that taste like the real thing. But the translation from fresh isn't easy.



By Julia Moskin

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Since 1962, when the Minneapolis entrepreneur Rose Totino introduced it to American shoppers, frozen pizza has been an after-school snack, the quickest route to dinner, a midnight temptation of last resort.

But in the last five years, frozen pizza has become something else entirely: a piece of culinary craft, an authentic taste of Italy, a connection to buzzy pizzerias like Roberta's in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and Pizzana in Los Angeles and Dallas.

Sales of frozen food surged during the pandemic, according to IRI and other market research firms, boosting premium mass-produced brands like Talia di Napoli and Table 87, and pushing even the most traditional pizzaiolos toward the freezer aisle.

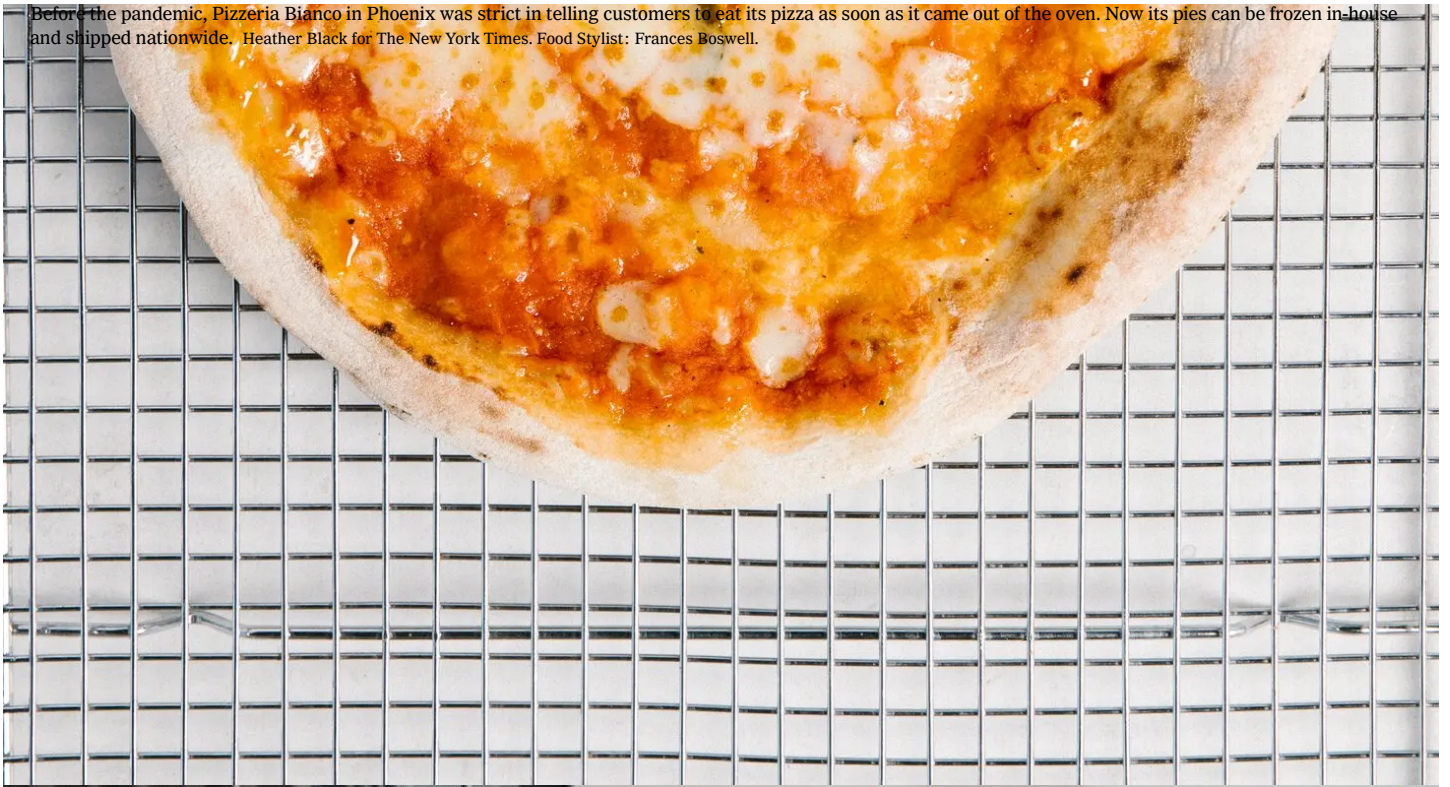
The challenge of pizza is to cook each element to peak deliciousness at once. When ice and shipping are added to the equation, that becomes even more complicated. Fresh mozzarella becomes clumpy, tomatoes dry out, crusts become soggy.

New freezing technology and affordable access to express shipping have made it possible for more options to slide into freezers. But they're not coming out of frozen-food factories owned by industry giants like Nestlé or Rich's. These new pies are wood- or coal-fired, hand-pulled and made with organic and Italian ingredients.

What they lack in the lavishness of a Tombstone Roadhouse Loaded Double Down Deluxe pizza, they strive to make up for in simplicity and quality. Like a Starbucks Frappuccino and a double espresso, producers say, there is a time and a place for each.



Before the pandemic, Pizzeria Bianco in Phoenix was strict in telling customers to eat its pizza as soon as it came out of the oven. Now its pies can be frozen in-house and shipped nationwide. Heather Black for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Frances Boswell.



Anthony Mangieri had to move production of his frozen pies to Italy in order to translate his acclaimed margherita at Una Pizza Napoletana in Manhattan to the freezer aisle. Daniel Krieger for The New York Times

Especially for products made with unprocessed ingredients, quick freezing is essential in preserving taste, aroma and texture. Once confined to factories, blast-chilling technology now has a much smaller footprint and is available to mom-and-pop pizza chains at relatively affordable prices.

When the pandemic temporarily shuttered the five popular Pizzeria Delfina restaurants in the Bay Area, the owners, Craig and Annie Stoll, began taking online orders for frozen pizza, making and freezing pies themselves and hauling a truck full of Igloo coolers to roadside delivery points. What saved the business, Ms. Stoll said, was the blast freezer they bought for \$15,000.

It's now possible to order frozen pizzas from some of the country's best pizzerias, either directly or through Goldbelly.

But it is not cheap: Three frozen margherita pies from Pizzeria Delfina, a favorite among four New York Times Food and Cooking staffers in a recent blind pizza tasting, cost \$104.95 including Goldbelly shipping. Four pies from Pizzeria Bianco cost \$129.95, or about \$32.50 per pie. (The same pizza costs \$20 at the original pizzeria in Phoenix, and \$24 in the Los Angeles store that opened last year.)

But the pizzas produced specifically for the freezer aisle of grocery stores are more competitively priced. Table 87, Roberta's, Talia di Napoli and Genio Della Pizza all charge about \$11 for a 14-inch pizza that theoretically serves three people, though two seems realistic and one entirely possible.



Rapid advances in blast-chilling technology and express-shipping logistics have made it possible to freeze pizza in peak condition. Heather Black for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Frances Boswell.

Mr. Mangieri said that making his Genio Della Pizza pizzas in Italy keeps the price down because heavy ingredients like buffalo mozzarella and canned plum tomatoes are available in bulk and don't have to travel to the United States.

Elly Truesdell, who advises and invests in small food companies through her venture capital fund New Fare, was director of new products at Whole Foods Market 10 years ago, during what she calls "the premiumization of the frozen aisle."

Although premium frozen products remain more expensive than conventional counterparts like DiGiorno, she said, they provide a chef-driven experience that's cheaper than going out to restaurants.

When Roberta's and Table 87 ventured into the national market, their pizzas' visual appeal, restaurant heritage and unprocessed ingredients were so distinguishable from their competitors that buyers found the products irresistible, Ms. Truesdell said.

The whole point of frozen pizza, though, is to become mainstream. Pizza takes up more space in supermarket freezers than any other product except ice cream, and introducing a new product into that space is difficult.

One way to carve out a spot is to stand out from the competition. Tom Cucco, a longtime Brooklyn restaurateur, started with a very specific dream: to open a pizzeria that sold coal-oven pizza by the slice. (Famously, old-school New York pizzerias like Totonno's and John's of Bleecker Street make only whole pies, to order.) He opened Table 87 in Brooklyn in 2012, and gained a following for his margherita.



Customers of Goldbelly, a nationwide shipper of specialty foods, pay as much as \$30 for frozen pies from high-end pizzerias. Heather Black for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Frances Boswell.

His son Robert said no one but his father thought it was a good idea to sell individually packed frozen slices. Though a deal resulting from his pitch on the show “Shark Tank” ultimately fell through, the slices took off and are now sold at Walmart, Wegmans and Whole Foods — an enviable retail trifecta.

In addition to the demands of the pandemic, many makers credit Joe Ariel, the founder of Goldbelly, for hauling them over the final hurdles to selling and shipping frozen pizza. The company, which handles orders and shipping for nearly 1,000 food businesses around the United States, sends members of its logistics and packaging-science team to get each vendor up to speed on best practices for freezing.

Pizza is the fastest-growing segment on the site, even without the help of the Super Bowl on Feb. 12. Depending on the draw, frozen tomato pies from Corropolese in Philadelphia or pizzas from the St. Louis chain Imo’s are likely to dominate.

“People will be stuffing themselves with the taste of home,” Mr. Ariel said. “Obviously, seeing Billy Joel at the Garden is the experience, but you’re not going to not listen to Spotify.”

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