



# Pizza Perception

A COMPLETELY FAIR AND BALANCED FIVE-SENSE APPROACH TO ESTABLISHING DETROIT-STYLE PIES AS THE NATION'S BEST

BY JEFF WARANIAK

I'm of the opinion that most food debates are nonsense. Taste is, after all, largely subjective. It's a combination of regional preferences and learned experiences that begin in the womb when we are no bigger than a Sbarro slice.

But pizza is different. There is a pizza that is objectively "best," and it's not from New York or Chicago, it's here in my native Detroit (See? No bias). But to base that claim on taste alone would just be ridiculous.

Anyone who's sniffed bacon, seen sushi, or cracked a crab can attest that the joys of food extend far beyond taste. Indeed, for a food to be dubbed great, let alone "best," it must pleasantly engage all five methods of sensory perception: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell.

No dish exemplifies this more clearly and familiarly, perhaps, than pizza. And in the context of the best regional pizza debate, where all pizzas admittedly *taste* good (thus rendering that point moot), there is only one pizza that provides the strongest all-around sensory experience: Detroit-style.

Let's not get hung up on semantics (for a definitive guide on pizza, see sidebar). Instead, let's cut to the chase and turn our gaze toward the most readily apparent point of debate: *sight*.

At a glance, New York-style pizza is boring. It's the yawn of the pizza world. Round, flat, and triangular in slice form, it may be the *de facto* standard as far as pizza visuals go, but this is irrelevant. Say "burger" and one might picture the familiar Big Mac. A beautiful food familiarity does not make.

Chicago-style is admittedly easy on the eyes. No one, regardless of regional bias, can deny that the endless stretching of cheese as it piles onto one's plate is sexy. This however, comes at a price. Secondly, the Chicago pizza, with its extra-long bake time, takes so long to even enter one's field of vision, that by the time it arrives tableside, its visual assets go overlooked.

But even if New York is the *de facto* standard and Chicago's cheese game is strong, Detroit-style is still the most visually appealing pizza. Square, dappled with sauce, and seductively cheesy in its own right, the Detroit-style pizza simply dazzles with originality. It is determinedly different—a daring *terra incognita* of pizza. Add the fact that the entire creation is encrusted by a frame of burnt, crispy cheese, and it is clear what the Detroit-style pizza resembles: a portrait—vibrant, modern, and nuanced—of the perfect pie.

Now, onto *sound*. There's a clear winner here,

for there is only one pizza among these three that *always* provides an audible crunch. Chew into a New York slice, and you are resolved to a sorry squish. Of course, a good New York pizza might feature a charred, crisp crust, but the crunch you get is chalky, cracker-like, and all together awful.

The sound of the Chicago pizza is equally sad. It is the sound of hungry diners scraping desperately with fork and knife in an attempt to assemble cheese, sauce, and crust into one well-balanced bite. Alas, they scrape in vain, for the Chicago pizza's proportions are disastrously and silently uneven.

Only a Detroit-style pizza consistently provides a satisfying, well-balanced crunch, whether you enjoy it from the tines of a clean Buddy's fork or held in hand.

But here in the arena of hand-helds is where Detroit-style pizza takes its one and only silver medal. Admittedly, the pizza most pleasant to the *touch* is New York's. There is magic in two-handing an oversized New York slice, delicately folding it along its midpoint, and uniting, for the very first time, two equal sides of isosceles cheese. It's engaging. It's interactive. It is, in a word, fun.

And yet, Detroit-style pizza is no bore to behold. A Detroit slice, if held in hand, tantalizes the fingers with a weighty, textured edge that provides a strong and secure grip. Is it as fun as the fold? No. But enticing nonetheless.

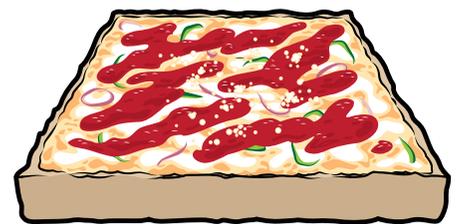
By contrast, Chicago pizza is a tactile mess. Contact comes only after one chisels away at the dense pie, lifts the heavy mass onto a plate, and threads the fingers through cheese again and again until the mozzarella rests, at last, in a wet pile beside the slice itself. Additionally, the Chicago pizza, by virtue of its heft, robs the hungry customer of reaching for a third or fourth slice. How terribly cruel.

And so we come to *smell*, the great equalizer of this debate. Walk into any pizza joint serving a reputable regional pie, and chances are, you're OK. In fact, the sauces used in each regional pizza typically include the same aromatic trifecta of garlic, basil, and oregano.

But even if we graciously concede that all three pizzas smell and taste, at the very least, decent, one still emerges victorious as the sensorial champion: Detroit-style. The Motor City original looks better, sounds better, feels better, and—as we all know—tastes better.

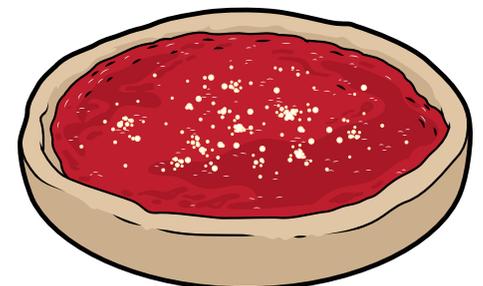
But of course, that's entirely a matter of opinion. h  
Special thanks: Loui's Pizza, 23141 Dequindre Rd., Hazel Park; 248-547-1711.

## The Three Great Regional Pizzas Defined



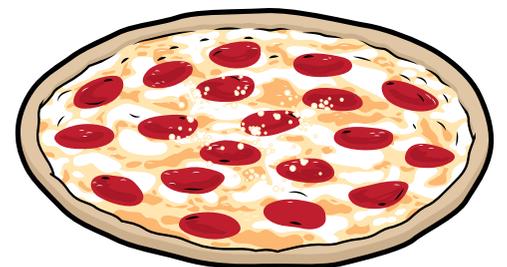
### DETROIT

A square, deep-dish, Sicilian-style pizza baked in a pan with mozzarella cheese, often, but not always, featuring tomato sauce ladled on top. For examples see Buddy's, Loui's, and Cloverleaf.



### CHICAGO

A round, thick, deep-dish pizza baked in a pan with a high, thin crust. Toppings are typically assembled "upside down" (i.e. cheese on the bottom, followed by toppings, then sauce on top). For examples, see Pizzeria Uno, Lou Malnati's, or, locally, PizzaPapalis.



### NEW YORK

A round, thin-crust, oven-baked, Neapolitan-style pizza topped with tomato sauce and cheese. Often requires the patented "New York fold." For examples, see New York's Joe's or locally, Supino's.