

Nick Mercadante's Homemade Pizza Recipe
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This is a "master dough." That means that it has wide applicability for a variety of uses (traditional pizza described here, Detroit, Roman, focaccia, bread etc). It can act as a basic framework for tinkering with measurements/flours/ingredients, and you can break off some to mix and use as a preferment for future bakes. The idea is to use this as your basic starting point, and have fun from there. Enjoy!

DOUGH INGREDIENTS (enough for two 16 inch pies) - Always measure in grams (get a scale); % are baker's percentages as a function of total flour weight

500g high protein/gluten flour (I use Central Milling Artisan Bread Flour; anything unbleached/un-bromated works ok - King Arthur Organic Bread Flour works and is available everywhere)

355g (72%) warm to luke-warm water (Use the water that tastes best to drink, don't use purified water)

14g good honey or omit

1.5g active dry yeast (about one half-teaspoon or .003%) - *Alternatively if you have a starter you are using you want the levain to be vigorous/young and ~15% of flour weight, or 75g.*

14g good extra-virgin olive oil (plus additional olive oil to coat proofing bowl)

12-13g fine sea salt (about 2.5%)

DOUGH TOOLS

Large non-reactive mixing bowl

Large non-reactive proofing bowl (or you can clean your mixing bowl before proof)

Measuring cups and spoons

Wooden spoon or stand-mixer or wet hands

plastic dough scraper (helps to get dough off the bowl and hands)

Plastic wrap (I like the sticky kind for stainless steel bowls)

DOUGH RECIPE

- In a large non-reactive bowl, mix honey into water with whisk until dissolved or omit honey.
- Whisk in active dry yeast until granules are fully dissolved and let stand for 2-5 minutes until you notice subtle bubbles form on surface. **NOTE: Normally I use my sourdough starter yeast but for most home pizzabois and pizzagrrls active dry yeast or even instant yeast is much easier to manage and yields more consistent results. Note that if you are using instant yeast you can skip the wait, or just add it right to the flour first. Active dry yeast needs a few minutes to activate and the wait is designed to ensure your yeast is alive. The honey helps wake it up and is also a subtle browning agent for the bake. You can sub diastatic malt powder in your flour instead of the honey trick.*
- Whisk in olive oil

- Slowly stir in flour with a large wooden spoon or clean hands. If you have a stand-mixer, now is the time to use it on a low setting.
- Mix and stir for several minutes until fully incorporated with no clumps and no loose dry flour. You do not need to be rough here and the final product should be rough looking, not a smooth ball (that comes later). If you have substantial dough sticking to your spoon, hands, or the walls of the bowl try adding a bit of dry flour to your hands or the spoon to help peel it off and incorporate into your dough blob.
- Cover bowl with plastic wrap and set aside in a slightly warm area (75F) for about 30-60 min
- Uncover bowl and slowly mix in salt, using wet hands to incorporate by dimpling the dough. Knead the dough as you mix in the salt by gently pulling up and away from blob, twisting and then folding and reincorporating at about a 90 degree angle from where you pulled. Spin the bowl and repeat, continuously pulling and reincorporating until all salt is fully incorporated, the dough is smooth and slightly more taught than when you first uncovered it. This process should take about 5 minutes max.

Note: The dough should NOT be aggressively kneaded into a smooth tight ball and should not be punched or pressed or torn at this stage. It should simply be pulled, twisted and folded with gentle but firm motions. If the dough gets too sticky rewet your hands a bit. If the dough is pooling or mushy in any way you've gotten your hands too wet and should instead use dry flour on your hands to prevent sticking (this shouldn't happen though).

- Rub a small amount of olive oil on the inside of the clean proof bowl. This bowl should have enough room to be twice the size of your dough blob.
- Move the dough from your mixing bowl to the proofing bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let sit 30-90 min
- At 30 min intervals coil fold the dough by lifting from middle and folding over itself to create surface tension. This strengthens the dough. After 2-3 coil folds you should be able to "windowpane the dough" by slowly pulling an edge thin. It's now ready for a long cold proof.
- Place in your fridge, ideally in the back near the bottom where the temperature is likely most stable. Make sure it's covered so it doesn't get a draft and create dry surface.

And now...we wait.

While you wait here's an easy PIZZA SAUCE recipe I use religiously:

- ***28oz good crushed tomatoes or hand crush some plum or San Marzanos***
- ***2-3 cloves garlic minced***
- ***2 tsp sea salt or to taste***
- ***2-3 basil leaves***
- ***2 tbsp of the best EVOO you can find***

Mix and throw in fridge for a day. Spread on your pie uncooked. It's elite.

You can remove your dough at any time after 24 hours and it will work just fine. But I highly recommend giving it at least 48 hours, and ideally 3 days for the yeast and the gluten to do their magic. This process is called cold proofing. It slows down the yeast to a bit of a crawl, and the result is a slower and longer rise that strengthens the gluten web that is formed, and imparts a favorable taste and texture you just can't get in same day room temp rises or even 24 hour cold proofed dough.

When you remove your dough from the fridge it should have approximately doubled in size and show signs the yeast has been working (bubbles, a soft but still moist looking texture, less ragged). Let the bowl sit covered in a warm to room temp location for about 30 min. While the dough rests, prep your bench. You should use a smooth surface that isn't made of plastic or something else arbitrarily rough or sticky. I like wood boards that can soak up my bench flour, but your counter will work fine. Generously sprinkle and spread either your pizza flour or any all purpose or other flour over the area. Don't be shy about the bench flour if your dough is sticky and hard to handle. More is sometimes better if you're new at this. Less is better if you've got sure hands.

Now - uncover the bowl.

Note: *This is where you can slightly punch the dough down by pressing your fist into the middle once...but I don't generally don't do this. Punching down helps to redistribute yeast, sugars, gas etc to create a more even crumb during the next proof. But I love a wild and open crumb on my pizza. Big holes and variety. So I don't punch down except maybe for a Sicilian where it's preferable to have a tighter crumb.*

Flip bowl to let gravity pull the dough blob out onto your bench. If you have a plastic dough scraper you can use that to help it along and scrape up any stray dough. Once on your bench sprinkle flour over the dough if it is particularly wet/tacky. Gently form into a rough rectangle. Now take the long end of the rectangle facing you and fold it up and into the middle of the dough, like folding an envelope. Do the same with the top end so that it forms a seam, rotate the dough 90 degrees, and repeat the same motions for the unfolded sides. Repeat this motion all the way around 2 to 3 times until the underside begins to form a smooth ball.

Pro tips: *If you see ripping as you form a tighter surface, you've gone too far. Be more gentle and try to shape a smooth ball. If its too sticky, add more bench flour to your hands. If the seams won't stick, flip the ball over so it is seam side down, and cup it in your hands as if it is a prayer offering. Gently spin and simultaneously pinch the bottom of the dough with the inner palms of each hand so as to foster a rounder ball and a closed seam. If its really an issue, find a stickier surface and roll the seam side around on it until it is relatively smooth and closed. Don't worry too much or over-handle it here...because...*

Once the large ball has been formed, you're going to cut it in half (each should weigh about 454g/1lb) and do the same thing all over again to form two smaller and tighter balls. Once these are formed you can either:

- Cover the smooth balls right on the floured bench with a damp (NOT WET) tight weave towel, or plastic wrap with a dry towel over it. If your home is particularly dry or drafty I also recommend rubbing a very small amount of olive oil over the surface of each ball to keep moist and prevent sticking.

OR

- Place each ball into either a deli container or medium size bowl and cover with plastic wrap or a lid.

Then...we wait...about 3 to 4 hours depending on the temp and the yeast's activity. Try to proof at around 72-75F (80F if naturally yeast). A microwave closed is always around 73F. An oven w the light on is usually around 75-80.

Check every hour or so and see when it has approximately doubled in size. If it seems ready at 2 hours, give it another 30 min or two and check again to see if it is the same. But ultimately the best way to know when it's ready is the thumbprint test: if you push in the dough and it springs back fast, it's underproofed. If it doesn't spring back at all, it's overproofed. If it springs back gradually and leaves a bit of the impression, it's just right.

Pro tips: You do not want the ball to form a hard shell of a surface so it is important to check on moisture levels. It should keep a smooth supple surface but also not seem so wet that you can poke into its surface. Basically you are looking to balance for equal softness and resistance in the surface and need to take into account the climate, how it is covered, etc. Re-dampen the towel if needed, or add a touch of olive oil over the surface if needed. Use your best judgment through trial and error.

PIZZA TIME

PIZZA TOOLS:

Oven with a good pizza stone or Baking Steel on the rack closest to the element (some do closest to broiler, every oven is different), preheated to 550 or as high as it can go for at least 60 minutes.

Pizza peel to get the pizza from your bench to the oven. A flat edgeless pan can work in a pinch

Semolina flour and/or AP flour evenly sprinkled over the peel to prevent sticking during transfer

a soup ladle or similar large spoon

pizza cutter

cheese grater (box grater with both large and small grate sizes works best)

INGREDIENTS:

Dough

Red Sauce or White Sauce or even just olive oil as a base

Combination of low-moisture whole milk mozz and fresh mozz or whatever cheese you like

Toppings!

Parmigiano Reggiano or any other hard cheese you like for finishing

EVOO

Give your dough ball a flour bath all the way around, sprinkling or dunking it into flour and then gently brushing excess flour off. Using cupped hands, gently push AROUND the middle of the dough ball to begin to flatten it, being careful to push to the outside without crushing or pinching the edges, and maintaining a bit of a mound right in the middle of you can. This will ensure your middle doesn't get too thin, and your edges puff up nice.

As it flattens you can use more of your hand to continue to push the dough out in the shape of a pizza, flattening the middle, and careful not to crush the outer crust. Lay the dough flat on your bench and flip one end from the bench onto the closed fist of your other hand. Gently lift up with that fist so that the pizza is about 50% draped over that fist and forearm, and remainder hanging on the bench. Slide your free hand underneath that end and form a fist. Start to shift your hands up to even level above surface, so that about 50% of the dough is supported by your fists, along its edges, and the rest hangs down to your bench. Carefully shift the dough across the surface of both fists in a circular motion, letting gravity stretch the edges of the dough, and gently pulling your fists away from each other to stretch the dough supported by your fists. Continue shifting like this until the dough is roughly 14 inches, and evenly stretched throughout.

Pro tip: Don't let the middle sag too much or it will start to get too thin and risk ripping. If it rips, don't worry. When you put it on the peel just cut a little piece off the crust and patch the area where the small hole formed. But try to keep the middle the same thickness as the rest of the inner pie and this shouldn't happen.

Once the dough is shaped, transfer to your floured peel. It is ok if the dough starts to shrink back in on itself a bit. Once it is topped we will give it a quick stretch before it goes in the oven.

VERY IMPORTANT: Time is of the essence once your dough hits the peel. The longer it sits, the harder it will be to shimmy it off onto your stone or steel. Hustle. Give it a shake if you're worried to ensure it is still loose.

- Add your sauce by ladling into middle and then spreading in concentric circles out to edge, leaving about a half inch border. Make sure the middle has as little sauce as possible to reduce flop. Add your cheese. I recommend thumb-sized chunks of fresh mozz dotted sparingly, and then large grated low-moisture mozz (scamorza is also great here) sprinkled liberally over the entire pie. Make sure again not to go heavy in the middle. Everything travels there. Generally speaking you probably need less sauce and less cheese than you think, but your call.
- Add your toppings
- *Audible: Use thin sliced low-moisture mozz and put on the pie first, then add fresh mozz, dollop sauce, and toppings*
- Give your dough a gentle stretch on all sides to the ideal size.
- Tilt and shimmy/bounce your pie from peel to stone starting at the back and pulling forward. Close your oven and stare at it.
- Depending on your surface and heat the pizza can take anywhere from 6-12 min. Bird dog it. Don't let your masterpiece burn. But definitely let it char.

Pro Tips: about 3-4 min in lift your pie with the peel and spinning to avoid uneven cooking due to oven hot spots. You can also use this time to check doneness on the bottom. You should see some black/brown spotting forming. At this point, if you have a top broiler, turn it on. This will help the top of the pie catch up with the bottom and give it that nice crisp char and finish over the cheese and cornicione. This may take some tinkering based on your oven. But try to get everything done at same time, bottom, top, and cheese. It's art not science.

Once the pie is done, remove it with your peel and place it on a non-stick cooling rack. You can use that to let the undercarriage get some air and promote crispness. Using a fine grater, add a good hard cheese to the surface like Parmigiano Reggiano (NOT Parmesan that's mystery cheese). I also recommend adding a bit of EVOO around the edges and other finishing touches like aromatic Sicilian Oregano, basil and/or thinly sliced cured meats that will melt into the surface.

Move to a serving tray, cut and serve.

Enjoy your delicious pizza! Send photos to @nmercad on Twitter or nickmercadante on IG.