

Family PIZZA Night  
By Adlen W. Robinson

When nobody feels like cooking, or when extra children are spending the night, dinner is usually spelled with five glorious letters—P-I-Z-Z-A. Though we sometimes order from our favorite pizza place, our family usually prefers a more interactive pizza night.

Before you reach for the telephone or that box of Chef Boyardee, why not try making your pizza from scratch? Pizza dough is really quite easy to make, and if you have children or grandchildren, they are guaranteed to want to get in on the act.

While pizza dough does require yeast, it is nothing like baking bread. While I prefer a dough that can rise for a few hours, your pizza will also be delicious if you only let the dough rise 30 to 45 minutes. That is just enough time to prepare the rest of the ingredients. Alternatively, you can make the dough ahead of time, cover and refrigerate. Just bring the dough back to room temperature, letting it rise before proceeding.

Our children love to make their own pizza, choosing their own toppings. By having lots of choices, children are more likely to try new things instead of the standard cheese and pepperoni. Two of our children like their pizzas “fully loaded” with mushrooms, peppers, olives, among other things. They never would have ordered their pizza that

way, but by topping their own pie, they discovered new flavors.

Many of our past birthday party sleepovers have had pizza-making as one of the activities of the night. Just be sure you have all the ingredients cut up and in bowls. And make more dough than you think you will need.

If you are still worried about making homemade pizza dough, there are several alternatives. Try canned bread dough, pizza crust mixes, or you can buy Boboli pizza shells. If you have a favorite pizza place, ask them if they will sell you some of their dough—most will happily oblige. My favorite way to make dough is to haul out my bread machine. I usually make one batch of dough (just use the “dough” setting on your machine), then put that batch in a big bowl with some olive oil and cover. Then I often make another batch of dough in the bread machine. The dough is fine sitting on the counter, or you can make it ahead, refrigerate, and then bring to room temperature before forming. As far as sauce goes, you can either purchase bottled pizza sauce, or just combine tomato sauce with some Italian herb seasoning, or better yet, use fresh herbs.

My husband and I often make our pizzas sans red sauce. One of our favorite variations is a pizza with caramelized onions and Gruyere cheese. We also love our pizza topped with sun-dried tomatoes, goat cheese, and portabellows mushrooms. Once you start experimenting, you can create

your own signature pizza that is much tastier than anything from a delivery place.

To ensure your family pizza party is successful, try having all or most of the ingredients prepped and ready to go. Let the kids help whenever possible. Even a child as young as four can help with the measuring and mixing. Children of all ages can be taught how to knead the dough—and believe me, they will love this. This is a perfect opportunity to instruct older children on how to properly use a knife. Before you know it, the children will be able to make pizza from start to finish. I am still working on how to get them to clean up afterwards...

Cooking as a family is not just about the food. Family pizza night will remind your children the importance of slowing down, and doing things the long way. Children today are all too familiar with the role “time” plays in our lives. We are always on the go, and usually in a hurry. This is an opportunity to offer the gift of our time to our loved ones—and in the process, consume some delicious pizza!

## BASIC PIZZA DOUGH

3 ½ cups all-purpose flour (a little more as needed)

2 teaspoons salt (preferably kosher or sea salt)

1 package active dry yeast

1 ½ tablespoons sugar

1 ½ cups warm water (not too hot or it will kill the yeast)  
1 ½ tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
2 tablespoons cornmeal for sprinkling onto pan

In food processor (or in a large bowl), combine 2 ½ cups flour and salt. In small bowl, mix together yeast, sugar, and warm water. In about 5-10 minutes, the yeast should begin to bubble. This is called “proofing” the yeast, and that tells you the yeast is alive and will make your dough rise. If it does not bubble, you need to try again. The water may have been too hot, or the yeast may be too old. Once the yeast has proofed, add it to the flour mixture. Add olive oil and process (or stir) for 20 to 30 seconds, until the dough pulls away from the sides and forms into a ball. If the dough is too sticky, add a little more flour. In a large bowl, add remaining 1-teaspoon olive oil. Roll the ball of dough in the oil, cover, and let rise for about 1 ½ hours, until dough is doubled in size. Punch down dough, divide into as many pieces as desired, and then knead the dough (or let the kids knead their own) for a few minutes. Form into pizzas; add the toppings of your choice and bake. Make sure your oven is very hot. Preheat to 450 degrees for at least 30 minutes. If you have a pizza stone, let it preheat along with the oven. Otherwise, sprinkle your baking pan with a little cornmeal, and ease the pizzas onto the pan. Bake at 450 degrees for about 12-15 minutes, depending on the size and thickness of your pizzas.

### Homemade Pizza Sauce

2 teaspoon olive oil

1 cup onion, finely minced  
2 cloves garlic, finely minced  
1 28oz can crushed tomatoes  
1 tablespoon sugar  
2 tablespoons fresh basil, chopped

Heat olive oil over medium-high heat. Saute onions until softened, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and continue cooking a few minutes. Add crushed tomatoes, sugar, and basil. Heat to boiling, then lower heat, cover and simmer sauce for 15 minutes or so. May be prepared ahead, covered and refrigerated until needed.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TOPPINGS

Thinly sliced red peppers  
Thinly sliced Vidalia onions  
Sliced pepperoni or salami  
Sliced mushrooms  
Cooked and crumbled Italian sausage  
Sliced black olives  
Sliced green olives  
Assorted shredded cheeses: mozzarella, Monterey jack, Parmesan, white cheddar

## FOR SPECIALTY PIZZAS

Sun-dried tomatoes, packed in oil, drained  
Roasted red tomatoes (if bottled, drained and chopped)  
Kalamata olives, pitted and chopped  
Fresh herbs, especially basil, thyme, oregano, marjoram

## Caramelized Onions

Assorted shredded cheeses: Goat cheese, Feta, Gruyere,  
Fontina, Asiago, Gouda, Kasseri  
Grilled zucchini and/or eggplant

**Adlen Robinson's Food column is published in every Friday's newspaper. Adlen's "Home Matters" column is published in the Lifestyles section of Sunday's newspaper. As always, Adlen welcomes reader tips, suggestions and comments. Please email her at [contact@adlenrobinson.com](mailto:contact@adlenrobinson.com) or write to her at the newspaper. Visit her web site at [www.adlenrobinson.com](http://www.adlenrobinson.com) for more columns and recipes.**