

# Pizza the action

*If you've never tried making pizza from scratch, Rachel Allen has some delicious recipes to tempt you intogiviugitago.*

*Photography by Tony Gavin*

**T**he whole idea of putting toppings on flatbread isn't a recent one. The ancient Greeks were adding onions, herbs and an oil made from olives to flatbreads thousands of years ago, and history records show that many other countries around the world were eating similar dishes throughout the ages, too.

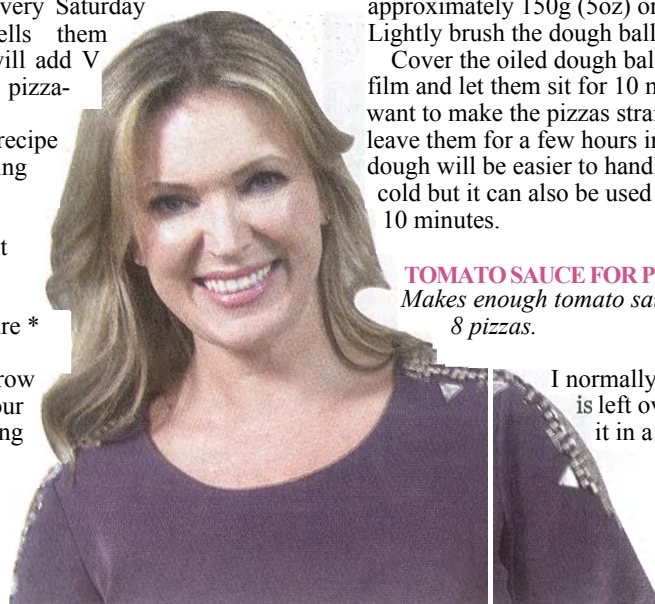
But the pizza as we know it today was, so the story goes, created by an Italian chef by the name of Raffaele Esposito, in the late 1880s, in honour of Italy's Queen Margherita's visit to Naples with her husband, King Umberto I. The scarlet-red tomato sauce, the white mozzarella cheese and the green basil represented the colours of the Italian flag. Of course, pizza has come a long way since then, but when a pizza is seriously great, it's sometimes hard to beat a classic Margherita.

While pizza is easy to make, there are a few basic but important points to remember to get right. The dough should be freshly made, the tomatoes for the sauce should be properly ripe and bright red, the cheese needs to be delicious, and the oven needs to be hot. Really hot. Those four elements are the basics of every pizza. Where you go from there then is totally up to you, as pizza will love everything from fat wedges of roasted red onions to shards of slow-roasted lamb shoulder with a drizzle of aioli over the top.

The flour for the dough is something that will make a huge difference. '00' flour is a very finely milled wheat flour that helps to give a gorgeously crisp crust, while being chewy at the same time. My brother-in-law, Philip Dennhardt, uses a mixture of '00' flour and an organic high-protein bread flour for his fabulous pizzas, which he cooks in the wood-burning oven at the Ballymaloe Cookery School every Saturday (see [saturdaypizzas.com](http://saturdaypizzas.com); he sells them nationwide), while many people will add V some semolina to theirs, as in the pizza-dough recipe, above right.

I love this roasted tomato sauce recipe right, as the high-temperature cooking will bring out the natural sweetness of the tomatoes and intensify their fruity flavour. Cheese-wise, I vary it depending on what else I'm putting on the pizzas, though a mozzarella and Cheddar or Gruyere-type mixture \* works really well on most pizzas.

So what are you waiting for? Throw on that pinny and bring out your inner Donatello and get pizza-making — you'll be very popular!



## PIZZA DOUGH

Makes 4-6 pizzas, depending on size.

### You will need:

325g (1loz) strong white flour, or bread flour, or '00' flour  
25g (1oz) semolina flour (fine semolina)  
1 teaspoon salt  
2 teaspoons caster sugar  
25g (1oz) butter  
15g (½oz) fresh yeast, or 7g (¼oz) dried yeast  
2 tablespoons olive oil, plus extra for brushing  
150ml-200ml (5fl oz-7fl oz) lukewarm water, depending on the type of flour used  
Flour, for your hands

Put the strong white flour or the bread flour or the 00 flour — see my Tip, right — whichever you're using, the semolina flour, the salt and the caster sugar in a large bowl. Rub in the butter until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs.

Put the fresh yeast or the dried yeast, whichever you're using, the 2 tablespoons of olive oil and the lukewarm water in a bowl or jug and allow the mixture to sit for a few minutes. Make a well in the centre of the dry ingredients in the bowl, add most of the yeast, olive oil and lukewarm water mixture and mix to a loose dough. Add more of the yeast, olive oil and lukewarm water mixture, if needed.

Transfer the dough from the bowl to a work surface, and knead it for 10-12 minutes or until it feels smooth and slightly springy. Lightly flour your hands if they become sticky, but try to avoid adding flour to the dough. The stickiness will go as you knead the dough. You can also do this in an electric food mixer with the dough-hook attachment for about half the time (5-6 minutes).

Oil a bowl with some olive oil and put the dough in it. Brush some olive oil on top of the dough, too. Cover the bowl with cling film and put the bowl in a warm area of your kitchen to allow the dough to rise until it has doubled in size. This can take between 45 minutes and one-and-a-half hours, depending on the temperature of the water you've used, and the freshness of the yeast.

When the dough is ready, it should have doubled in size, and also you'll see that when you press the dough with a floured finger, it will not spring back, but stay indented. Knock back the dough by punching it in on itself, then knead it for just 2 minutes more.

Use a knife to cut the dough into four (or six) balls of dough, they will each weigh approximately 150g (5oz) or 100g (4oz) each. Lightly brush the dough balls with olive oil.

Cover the oiled dough balls with cling film and let them sit for 10 minutes if you want to make the pizzas straight away, or leave them for a few hours in the fridge. The dough will be easier to handle when it is cold but it can also be used after just 10 minutes.

## TOMATO SAUCE FOR PIZZAS

Makes enough tomato sauce for about 8 pizzas.

I normally freeze whatever is left over, or else I use it in a pasta sauce.

### You will need:

450g (1lb) ripe tomatoes, halved  
3 cloves of garlic, peeled and kept whole  
5 tablespoons olive oil  
3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar  
A good pinch of caster sugar  
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to as high as it will go, if possible to 250°C, 475°F, Gas 8. To make the sauce, put the halved tomatoes on a baking tray or roasting tray, with the cut side facing up. Add the whole cloves of garlic, drizzle with the olive oil and the balsamic vinegar, and season with the caster sugar and some sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Cook in the oven for 20-30 minutes or until the tomatoes are completely soft and blistered.

Remove the tray from the oven, blitz the tomatoes and the garlic in a blender, or using a hand blender, until they are smooth, and then strain the sauce into a bowl through a fine sieve.

Check the seasoning — adding more sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, if necessary — and the consistency of the tomato sauce. It should be thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. If it needs thickening, pour it into a saucepan, bring it to the boil and reduce it to thicken it — this could take up to 10 minutes.

## PIZZA MARGHERITA

Makes 4 pizzas.

### You will need:

Semolina flour or fine polenta, for dusting  
Pizza dough (see recipe, above left)  
Tomato sauce (see previous recipe)  
600g (1lb 5oz) grated mozzarella, or a mixture of mozzarella and Cheddar cheese  
Torn fresh basil leaves

Preheat the oven to as high as possible. Put one or two baking sheets upside down in the oven to heat up (I find it best to cook just one or two pizzas at a time). If you're using a pizza stone, it will take about half an hour to heat up, and be sure to put it in when the oven is cold — if you put it in the oven when the oven is hot, it could shatter!

Then, on a floured work surface (using semolina flour or fine polenta if you wish), roll out each dough ball in a circle until it is very thin (leave the edges just slightly thicker so the pizza topping won't slide off). You can do the window-pane test by holding the rolled-out dough up to the window; you should be able to see the light through it.

Put each rolled-out circle of dough on a pizza paddle or an upturned baking tray that has been dusted with semolina flour or fine polenta, whichever you're using, to prevent it from sticking. I prefer to use fine polenta or semolina flour, rather than flour, for this, as flour can absorb the moisture in the pizza and cause it to stick if it doesn't go straight into the oven, whereas fine polenta or semolina flour acts like little ball bearings, and the pizza should slide easily off the paddle or tray into the oven.

Spread the tomato sauce all over each base, leaving a 2.5cm (1in) border around the edge. Scatter the grated mozzarella or the mixture of mozzarella and Cheddar, whichever you're using, over the sauce.



## RACHEL'S TIP

'00' flour is a very finely milled flour that works really well for pizzas. It has a consistency not too dissimilar to baby powder. Watch out when using a flour like this, though, as it will require less water than a regular flour.



(If you're making a pizza other than a Margherita, add your choice of toppings at this point.)

Slide each pizza off the cool baking sheet onto the hot sheet in the oven and cook for 5-10 minutes, depending on the thickness of the pizza and the heat of the oven, until the pizza is golden underneath and bubbling on top. Scatter torn fresh basil leaves over the top of each pizza, and serve immediately.

### LAMB, FETA AND CHARD PIZZA

*Makes enough for 4 large pizzas (about 30cm (12in) in diameter).*

This is a tomato-free pizza. Chard is such a lovely green, its mineral flavour is really distinctive and works so well on this pizza. The spring onions bring sweetness, while the salty feta is nicely browned in the oven. The lamb works particularly well with these Greek flavours, but if you have left-over cooked chicken it would be lovely too.

#### You will need:

Pizza dough (see recipe, above left)  
6 tablespoons olive oil  
400g (12oz) chard, stalks and leaves separated and chopped  
12 spring onions, finely sliced  
4 cloves garlic, crushed or finely grated  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper  
2 teaspoons toasted and ground cumin  
4 tablespoons chopped fresh mint  
Semolina flour or fine polenta, for dusting  
400g (12oz) feta-style cheese (such as St Tola, Knocklara, or Toonsbridge)  
400g (14oz) cooked lamb

Make the pizza dough as previously described. Cover the dough and allow it to rise as you make this topping.

Place a frying pan on a high heat and add two tablespoons of the olive oil. Next add

the chard stalks, the finely sliced spring onions and the crushed or finely grated garlic, whichever you're using. Season with some salt and freshly ground black pepper and cook for three minutes. Add the toasted and ground cumin, the chopped chard leaves and half of the chopped mint, and cook for a further two minutes until the chard is tender. Season to taste with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Preheat the oven as high as possible, and place a pizza stone or an upturned baking sheet in it to get really hot.

Then, on a floured work surface (using semolina flour or fine polenta if you wish), roll out each dough ball in a circle until it is very thin (leave the edges just slightly thicker so the pizza topping won't slide off).

Put each rolled-out circle of dough on a pizza paddle or an upturned baking tray that has been dusted with semolina flour or fine polenta, whichever you're using, to prevent it from sticking.

Spread the chard, spring onion and garlic mixture all over each rolled-out circle of pizza dough, then crumble over the feta-style cheese and top with the cooked lamb. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper and drizzle a further tablespoon of the olive oil over each pizza.

Slide the pizzas, one at a time, carefully but quickly onto the hot stone or tray and bake for 5-10 minutes (the cooking time will depend completely on your oven) until they are golden brown and crisp around the edges and melted in the centre.

You may need to cook the pizzas one at a time, depending on the size of your oven. Scatter the remaining chopped mint over the top and serve.

### GOAT'S CHEESE, RED ONION AND CHORIZO PIZZA

*Makes enough for 4 large pizzas.*

I adore chorizo with anything, and it loves nothing more than being cooked on a

pizza to bring out its incredibly delicious, deep flavour. The red onions are roasted to tease out their sweetness, which is the ideal balance for the intensely savoury and creamy goat's cheese.

#### You will need:

Pizza dough (see recipe, above left)  
Tomato sauce (see recipe, below left)  
2 red onions, peeled and cut into 6 or 8 wedges each  
4 sprigs fresh thyme  
6 tablespoons olive oil  
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper  
400g (14oz) Irish goat's cheese, broken into 2cm (lin) chunks  
110g (4oz) chorizo (such as Gubbeen chorizo) cut into slices ½cm (¼in) thick

Make the pizza bases and the tomato sauce.

Preheat the oven to as high as possible, and place a pizza stone or a baking sheet in it to get really hot.

Put the red onion wedges on a roasting tray with the sprigs of fresh thyme. Drizzle them with 4 tablespoons of the olive oil, season with some sea salt and freshly ground black pepper and roast them for 10-15 minutes until the red onion wedges are tender and browned around the edges.

Spread the tomato sauce over the pizza bases, then scatter over the roasted red onion wedges. Dot the goat's cheese chunks around the pizzas, along with the sliced chorizo. Drizzle the pizzas with the remaining 2 tablespoons of the olive oil and season with a little freshly ground black pepper.

Slide the pizzas, one at a time, onto the hot stone or tray and bake them for 2-12 minutes (the cooking time will depend completely on your oven) until they are golden brown and crisp around the edges and melted in the centre. You may need to cook the pizzas one at a time, depending on the size of your oven. □