

Pizza: Where did it come from?

By

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I once asked this same question of a good friend of mine (non-Italian!). She said, “America, of course!”

This immediately reminded me of a quote I heard about Sophia Loren saying when she first came to this country and saw all the pizza parlors everywhere: “I didn’t know there were so many poor people in America.”

And this, in turn, reminded me of a peculiar event I experienced when I was a student at the University of Florence in 1954, and decided to visit my grandmother’s family in a small town near Naples. Since I was a student I stayed overnight at a cheap hotel in that city, in a room with a window overlooking an alley out back.

At around 7:AM I smelled the distinct odor of burning oil. When I looked out the window there was a long line of workmen waiting for a woman who was frying small flat pieces of round shaped dough dusted with flour, to hand each of them for breakfast. They called it “pizza.” Nowadays if you go to a grocery store in the United States and ask for some “pita bread” (Greek in origin), you would see what I am talking about.

Not to sound too academic, the ancient Romans called southern Italy and Sicily, “Magna Graecia” or “Great

Greece,” the area where the famous philosopher/geometrician, Archimedes lived, in the city of Syracuse. And since Naples itself was originally called “Neapolis,” Greek for “New City,” the connection between “pita” and “pizza” is not so difficult to see.

But none of this explains how what we all know as “pizza” today, became the universally loved “quick meal” in this country as well as Italy and much of Europe, if not the world.

The story most frequently told about its origin relates that, not long after the unification of Italy, the new Queen Margherita came to visit the Palazzo Capodimonte in central Italy. While there she asked the Neapolitan Chef, Raffaele Esposito, to create a large pizza in honor of her visit. He offered her three different varieties, but the one she preferred was decorated in the colors of the new Italian flag: red, white and green, or tomato sauce garnished with mozzarella cheese and basil, now known as “Pizza Margherita.”

Today 35% of all Americans eat some variation of “Pizza Margherita” (with or without pepperone, etc.) so frequently, that it is easy to understand why my non-Italian friend and Sophia Loren made the comments cited above. In fact, Papa John’s, Domino’s, Sam’s Club, and thousands of other venues, offer such a meal, daily and inexpensively, to all their customers, whoever they may be.

So now, yes, it is a special American dish, no matter what its origin!



Pizza Margherita

