

the best sauce

the best crust

the best cheese



The Best Take-Out Pizza

By **Christine Barbour**

the best topping



(left) A Buffalo Chicken Pizza with hot sauce, crumbled blue cheese, and mozzarella from Uncle D's. Photo by Christine Barbour (above) The judges sampled 24 pizzas. They are, from left, Dave Tallent, Christine Barbour, David Fletcher, Jenna Blumenfeld, Andrew Appel, Cindy Bradley, David Wade, and Patrick Baude. Photo by Ben Weller

When it comes to pizza, Americans are all over the map.

On the East Coast they like their pizza lightly sauced and dripping with cheese, its thin, chewy crust blasted in a hot oven so the outside edges bubble up and get a little charred. Proper New Yorkers eat it on the go, folded up so it doesn't droop from their hands like a Salvador Dali clock. Up in Chicago it's deep-dish pie, with an almost pastry-like crust. Loaded with rich, sweet tomato sauce, and toppings galore, this pizza definitely requires a sit down with a knife, a fork, and a napkin tucked under the chin.

Way out in sunny California pizza is oh-so-chic, thin-crust-ed, preferably wood-fired, and topped with exotic "gourmet" ingredients like duck sausage, Thai chicken, pear and gorgonzola, or avocado and goat cheese. True pizza lovers eat this with raised eyebrows and suspended disbelief.

And the Winner Is...

Uncle D's New York Pizza

1st runner up

Mother Bear's Pizza

2nd runners up

Rockit's Famous Pizza

(tie)

Café Pizzeria

Now here in Bloomington we have a population that hails from all over the country—a little bit East Coast, a little bit west, and a little bit in between. Not surprisingly, when we assembled a panel of judges to pick the best pizza in town, finding a consensus was tough. While we did indeed come up with a winner, no one pizza was loved by everyone and every pizza had its fans. Pizza is just like that, which is why so many different pizzerias thrive in this college town.

The judges were all pizza enthusiasts whose professional lives involve cooking food—two cooking store owners (Andrew Appel, Goods for Cooks, and David Wade, The Inner Chef), two chefs (David Tallent, Restaurant Tallent, and David Fletcher, BLU Boy Café and Cakery), and four food writers (Cindy Bradley of *The Herald-Times*, Jenna Blumenfeld of the *Indiana Daily Student*, and both Pat Baude and me from *Bloom Magazine*). We all like to think we know something about food, but for sure we know what we like when it comes to pizza.



It's hard work, but someone has to do it. Judge Jenna Blumenfeld of the *Indiana Daily Student* finishes off a slice.
Photo by Ben Weller

The rules were these: We judged take-out pizzas only. Real sit-down pizza restaurants like Lennie's, FARM, and Finch's were saved for another day. And the pizzas had to come from locally owned pizzerias. The only chains on our list were small and regional. We called 14 pizzerias and ordered two pizzas from each—one regular cheese and one “specialty” pizza. All 14 pizzerias took our order, but only 12 delivered (still no report on the missing two). All were sent to the same location; all were heated up in a commercial, restaurant oven, and served hot. As far as the testing conditions could be controlled, we controlled them.

We judges tasted the pizzas blind. The only identifying information attached to them was a number. We didn't want to be swayed by existing prejudices for or against any of the pizzerias. We rated the pies on crust, cheese, sauce, and overall pizza goodness. Hard to describe that last category, but you definitely knew it when you tasted it.

Of course, tasting food is not exactly like tasting wine. You don't roll it around in your mouth and spit it out; you actually have to swallow the stuff. In my experience of these things, foods tasted last are often disadvantaged by the fact that everyone is full and their taste buds are weary, so it is worth noting that in our case the 23rd and 24th pizzas we tasted were the ones that knocked the most socks off (although true to our pattern, one taster even gave the overall favorite low marks for crust and cheese).

What did we learn, besides the fact that we judges, like all Americans, had eclectic and diverse pizza tastes?

The winner by a good margin was Uncle D's New York Pizza. Uncle D's, located in Dunkirk Square, is the offshoot of a popular Ann Arbor, Michigan pizzeria. The first franchise of the five-store operation and the only one outside of Michigan, the Bloomington Uncle D's has only been around for about a year. New York style, thin-crust and flavorful, its sauce and its specialty toppings (which reminded us all of chicken parmigiana) got rave reviews—and it had just the right amount of cheese.

(“I like cheese,” said one judge, voicing the views of many, “but I don't want to swim in it.”)

If first place went to a newcomer, second went to a venerable Bloomington institution, Mother Bear's on West 3rd Street. Mother Bear's got top marks for its crust (“thick,” said one judge, “but in a good way”) and its cheese.

Third place was a tie, between Café Pizzeria, a local pizza legend on Kirkwood hailing from the 1950s, and Rocket's, on Walnut just north of the downtown Square. Café Pizzeria got credit for its savory, “cracker-like crust,” with its toppings (a banana pepper, sausage, and pepperoni combo) giving it, in one judge's view, an “overall spicy, smoky flavor.” Rocket's is another thin-crust, New York-style pizza, this one with lots of sauce and an “interesting” topping combo that included, among other things, pineapple, chicken, and jalapeño peppers (though “pineapple does not belong on pizza,” sniffed one judge).

But even the pizzas that didn't win had fans. “Well-made and savory,” said one about a pie from DeAngelo's. “I really like this crust,” said another about Pizza Express. “Fresh tomato—a breath of fresh air,” about the Mad Mushroom's entry. And “Good, thin crust and yummy pine nut, sun-dried tomato, and basil topping,” about Max's Place. And so it went, all over the map. ✨

IU Basketball Alum Brought Uncle D's to Bloomington

The “Uncle D” in Uncle D's New York Pizza is Domenico Tellemaco, a native of Monfetta, Italy, who made pizza in New York before arriving in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to meet his fiancée's parents and noticing that while pizza-by-the-slice shops are a dime a dozen in New York, there were none to be found in that Midwestern college town.

He founded the New York Pizza Depot (NYPD) in 1997, but when he decided to open more outlets, the New York Police Department wasn't wild about his appropriation of their acronym and he named the new stores Uncle D's.

IU basketball alum Brian Evans, a friend of Tellemaco's brother-in-law, decided to open an Uncle D's shop in Bloomington in 2007. Today there are five Uncle D's in all—four in Ann Arbor and nearby Ypsilanti, and the one in Bloomington, owned by a partnership that includes Evans and Tellemaco's cousin Andre D'Angelo, also from Italy, who moved from Ann Arbor this year to manage the pizzeria.