

Flattened Dough with Stuff on Top

Brendan: Welcome back to *How to be American*, a new podcast from the Tenement Museum in New York City. I'm Brendan Murphy.

Imagine you're standing on the third-floor landing of our historic tenement building at 97 Orchard Street, and you see a little boy galloping down the hallway and through an open door. He joins a family of four crowded around a small dinner table covered in red gingham, and deeply inhales the smells wafting from bowl of spaghetti and sauce that's steaming in front of him. This young boy's name is Irving Cohen. He's not at his dinner table, and the people sitting around it are not actually his family. His family's apartment is just across the hall. But this apartment – and the people, smells, and tastes that live within it have become a source of comfort for him.

Irving and his mother moved into 97 Orchard Street in 1929 after his father passed away. Irving's family was Jewish, and they kept a Kosher home. Adolfo Baldizzi and his family, who we met in the last episode, lived across the airshaft. The Baldizzi's were not Jewish and most certainly not Kosher. They were Catholics from Sicily. These two families developed a very close relationship, and the Baldizzi family apartment became a second home for Irving. In many ways, Adolfo became a father-figure in his life.

Irving Cohen: You know I liked him too. I tell you, I lived in his apartment when there was no room for me to sleep in the house. He took me in – and they weren't kosher, of course. I learned how to eat all Italian food! To this day, I like Italian food because of Adolf!

As Irving's love of spaghetti and sauce shows us, a food can immigrant by crossing an ocean or merely crossing a hallway. But just because Irving loved Italian food doesn't mean the rest of his family did. Food provides connections between cultures but it can also divisive when it's seen as new or different. At what point does a cultural dish go from being seen as "immigrant or other" to "American"? What happens when immigrant foodways collide with American culture?

To investigate this, we need a case study. A food so beloved and so contested that it has left families and friends at each other's throats. That food – is Pizza.

Now, I'm from Seattle, and when I think of the pizza that I grew up with I think of picking up take n' bake pizza from Papa Murphy's - no relation. It's a chain where they add the toppings and then you take it home and you bake it. But now that I live in New York, that's changed. I think of dollar slice places on every other block, waiting in line under the Brooklyn Bridge for Grimaldi's, and then walking and talking and eating that slice all at the same time.

Just like millions of people who came to the United States, New York City is pizza's port of entry. It was in New York City that pizza was transformed into the pie we know and love today. So, to tell pizza's own surprising immigration story, we need to start at the beginning – and that is in Naples, Italy.

When we decided we wanted to talk about the history of pizza, we knew exactly who we had to call.

Scott: My name's Scott Wiener and I'm a professional pizza enthusiast who hosts tours of pizzerias all around New York City.

Brendan: Scott, how many pieces of pizza do you eat a week?

Scott: First let me ask, where'd you grow up - west coast?

Brendan: I was born in Georgia so I sometimes y'all in drawl but I spent most of my formidable years in Washington state.

Scott: Yeah, okay, I figured, 'cause you said piece instead of slice. Interesting.

Brendan: Once we got past how I was perhaps not even qualified to talk about pizza, Scott explained why he loves his work with pizza so much. Oh, and how many slices does he eat in a week?

Scott: 15 slices a week.

But what I've learned over the, over a decade of taking people to pizzerias is that by learning the story of this food and how deep it goes, knowing how much depth there is and history and science and technology and everything, I think it makes them look at other things in a deeper way. So when they say to me, you know, I'll never look at pizza at the same way again, to me, I'm hoping that also means I'll never take other things for granted.-

Brendan: I wanted to learn about pizza's true beginnings, long before immigrants from Naples came to New York, what even was pizza?

Scott: So, we kind of have to talk about the definition of the word itself, just because to you and I right now and to anybody listening to this pizza probably means dough that's been flattened and there's stuff on top of it. It's probably tomato and cheese. Maybe there's no tomato, maybe there's no cheese, maybe there's some stuff on it, whatever. But it's, it's that, it's a dough that gets baked with some stuff on it. Whatever. But it's a dough that's baked with some stuff on it. So, the word pizza predates that food or at least that food in Italian cuisine, just because something that we could describe as pizza has existed all over the Mediterranean region. Uh, you know, as far back as there has been wheat harvest and flour milling and you know, there's evidence of that going back, tens of thousands of years. So, to talk about the food that we're, we know of as pizza today, you're really talking about probably the late 17th century, early 18th century.

Really, we have to follow back our story to this Pizza Napolitano, pizza of Naples, which the word pizza before this time, really just referred to breads, flattened breads. So, we can kind of pull from that that the specific flattened bread of Naples, which has eventually gets the tomato and

the cheese on it. That's the thing that we know of today as just pizza. But back in those days, it was a specific type of flatbread called Pizza Napolitano.

Brendan: I was surprised to learn that people making this proto-pizza were actually just bakers.

Scott: So, it was mostly working class and it was being made by bakers. So, nobody had a special oven for pizza. In fact, we don't really see any evidence of specific ovens made for pizza until the 1930s. So, at this time we're talking about wood fired ovens in southern Italy. They were being used for bread and bakers would make pizza as a way to sort of control the temperature in their oven. So, if you overheated your temperature, you could cool it down by baking pizza. It's not like today where we set the thermostat on the oven. Back in those days, you build a fire inside the oven and then you, you let the fire die down and you sweep out the ashes and you're using the heat that's trapped in by the oven. So, you fire at once and then you ride that wave as the temperature drops, you bake lower temperature breads. So, pizza was a way to cool down the ovens.

Brendan: Pizza also became a high-class curiosity.

Scott: There is an upper-class experience of pizza that was happening at the same time. We have a lot of stories of King Ferdinand, Queen Margarita of Savoy. Uh, all these monarchs coming through and eating pizza as a curiosity because they wanted to experience what the lower class experienced. And so you also have a lot of evidence of writers coming in from France and from England and from northern Italy. None of them had experienced pizza before and they're writing about it as this curiosity and really writing about it in a negative way. They're all describing it as a disgusting food. It's surrounded by flies. The person selling it is as disgusting as the food itself. Like it was totally a low person's food.

Brendan: Wow. The and what were these, what were these folks who coming to experience pizza? What were they finding on it? What was the general topping that they might experience?

Scott: There was lard, like pig fat. Okay. Uh, there were tomatoes, some of the mentioned cheese. And when they mentioned cheese, it's most likely, they're talking about hard cheese rather than Mozzarella. You also had anchovies, it was all the food of the poor.

Brendan: And this is where the original slice was born.

Scott: You could buy pizza by the slice in Naples. A lot of misconceptions that you know, that New York invented pizza by the slice and all these things, but it's totally not true in Naples. You could, if you didn't have enough money for a whole pizza, you could have a quarter of it.

Brendan: This street food was the original pizza. But I wanted to know how this flat bread topped with lard and covered in anchovies, eaten by working class Italians, become the classic New York slice?

It began with migrants from Southern Italy. In our last episode we explored the story of the Baldizzi family, who came to the United States in the 1920s as part of the largest voluntary emigration in world history. Between 1880 and 1915 alone, almost 13 million Italians migrated to America. They chose to leave because of political upheaval, social unrest, economic instability, and a series of natural disasters. Many of them didn't have a lot to bring with them. But sometimes the things we carry aren't packed in bags or trunks – they are the recipes we store in the back of our minds. Pizza arrived in Little Italy, and just like the people who brought it, it had to adapt.

Scott: It's interesting. It actually does come to America before it spreads around Italy. Earliest evidence of a pizzeria in Italy, besides Naples, is one in Rome that opened in 1905. But I think it closed a few months later. So, it didn't really work out because remember, Italy at that time had only recently become a legal entity in 1861 so it's, it's not a unified country in culture or in art or in food or anything. It's totally separate. So, Naples is looked down upon, the food of Naples is looked down upon. So, the food pizza does not spread through Italy. It comes to places like Argentina and Brazil and New York City in the late 19th century. So, we have some early articles describing pizza at that time. 1903-1901 there are a couple of little mentions and there, but it's definitely happening in the, in the late 19th century, early 20th.

Brendan: Italian immigrants had to make do with ingredients they found in the United States.

Scott: And they didn't bring ingredients because that would have been heavy. Nobody's bringing bags of flour or tinned tomatoes or anything. So, the flour that was being used in Italy was pretty low in protein at the time and probably pretty coarse. In America, by that time we had had roller milling, uh, in the Midwest we had roller milling, which means you can separate the wheat from the chaff better. It means you can get a more purified white flour. So, our flour here, our wheat here, in America is higher in protein than the Italian flour, which means that you get a stronger dough. It's a drier dough if you use the same amount of water in Italy and in America. So right off the bat you have a huge ingredient change with just the flour. Then you have the ovens, because wood-fired ovens were common in Naples, but wood was so expensive in Manhattan that and in New Haven and in Trenton, all these pizzerias in bakeries were opening with coal-fired ovens. So rather than heat up the oven with wood that was expensive, they design new ovens to burn coal.

Brendan: In my mind, wood-fire pizza always seemed kind of very new. I never actually associated wood-fire is the authentic quote-unquote “authentic” pizza. Um, I always assumed it was just these kind of big brick coal ovens.

Scott: Well, you're right, because look, wood-fired pizza did not come over originally. It couldn't have because it was economically prohibitive to use wood. So, in a sense, wood-fired is new to America and just the past 20-25 years. But, in Italy it was all wood-fired when you came to America, the oldest cities that we're doing it, we're doing coal-fired just because it was cheap. And then now we get this sort of, this sort of reintroduction of, of wood-fired and, and everybody loves it now. And we do think of it as the new fancy newfangled thing. Meanwhile, it's really the old low-class thing.

Brendan: So, as pizza adapted to America the way it was cooked changed as well. But, let's go back to the ingredients for a second.

Scott: Well, Pepperoni was not an Italian ingredient. Pepperoni is a version of a spicy Salami, but it's totally American. It's beef and its pork and it's usually got a lot of Cayenne, paprika, you

know, so you get the deep color and it looks very different from when you get soppressata from Italy, which is kind of larger chunks. This is more of a ground down. It's the bits, it's the leftovers. So, pepperoni already is a hybrid. It's an Americanized item.

Brendan: However, pizza's new accessories like spicy cured meats and pungent garlic were not well received by all Americans.

Scott: Garlic was just a big one. That garlic, even to the Italians, garlic was cheap. It meant something was cheap. There were sort of unspoken rules about what you can add garlic to and you can't combine garlic can cheese, cause that's taking expensive cheese and pairing it with cheap garlic.

Brendan: That's incredible. I order just garlic and cheese pizza.

Scott: Look, it tastes great. You're not wrong here.

Brendan: These negative perceptions about certain ingredients didn't begin and end with Italians and garlic. Food reformers looked down on flavors they saw as "foreign." These progressive-era food reformers were wealthier native-born Americans who were part of a network of nutritional experts, cooking instructors and public campaigners. They'd visit public schools and settlement houses. They created pamphlets, delivered speeches, and even performed food demonstrations in order to spread their message. Dietitians from reform organizations promoted a bland, New England-style diet built around foods they thought of as simple and wholesome: plain cod fish, brown bread, baked beans. Reformers believed that spicy food could inflame the temper or even cause alcoholism. One dietician even urged Eastern Europeans to stay away from sour and pickled flavors because they allegedly caused irritability. Arguing that this made assimilation more difficult for people already so emotional. These reformers meant well, sure, but understandably, immigrants were extremely resistant to giving up the spices, flavors, and ingredients they loved. These ingredients held meaning for them beyond their assigned nutritional and monetary value. This type of discrimination wasn't just coming progressive nutritionists, however, it was being printed in the newspapers as well.

Scott: There's a 1903 article in the New York Tribune that's explaining this new immigrant group, to people who are reading the English language newspaper. And so, it says, oh, in there they have fiery tempers. It's probably because they have all these peppers that they're drawing out on the line. And it's that kind of thing where this is like, you know, I'm not, I don't know if it's a microaggression or just straight up racism, but it's definitely something that's from the perspective of us versus them.

Brendan: I wanted to hear more about some of the early pizza restaurants in the Lower East Side, home of the Tenement Museum.

Scott: Well, we know some of the common stories which are Lombardi's, which opens in 1905 on spring street.

Brendan: People still wait for three hours for a slice of pizza from Lombardi's, lining up around the block to take a bite of American history. It's even painted on the wall: "Welcome to America's first Pizzeria. Enjoy our slice of history," it says. By the way – to this day you cannot get a slice of garlic and cheese pizza at Lombardi's.

Lombardi's founder, Gennaro Lombardi, actually played a big role in pizza history. By the late 1890s he was running a grocery store with his name on it. Somewhere around that time he hired a man names Antony Totonno to work in his grocery store. It might have been Antony who grabbed a slice from his favorite cart before he climbed aboard a steamship bound for America, because soon thereafter someone began selling slices of pizza out the back of his boss's grocery store. In 1905, Lombardi applied for the first ever license to sell pizza in the United States.

Scott: We know that Anthony Piro who worked for Gennaro in the early days, there's a famous photograph of the front of Lombardi's taken in 1908 and just the two of them standing out front and Anthony Piro later split off and opened up Totonno's in Coney Island in 1924 and that's an important family for the whole thing because he was the baker. He was, he was a baker over at Lombardi's.

Brendan: Word quickly spread about the delicious flatbread you could buy out of the back of Lombardi's grocery.

Scott: There are a couple of listings in some newspapers in New York in 1901 and in 1903 that talk about pizza existing in the city and it's being written in the English language written by English speakers. So, they're speaking to locals in the same way that I read in the Times a few weeks ago about an Azerbaijani restaurant. And I went there and you know, you got to assume that if something's being written about, a couple of people are possibly being adventurous and going. So well, we can, we can make these assumptions that it did happen that early.

Brendan: Pizza has continued to evolve over the years. And we knew that for this story to be complete we needed to talk to someone currently making pizza in New York City. When I asked Scott if he had anyone in mind, he immediately, he picked up the phone and called Scarr Pimentel.

Scott: So, Scarr opened his namesake pizzeria a few years ago in the Lower East Side. And the whole idea was to bring back the pizza of his childhood. So it is a New York slice shop through and through, and it's a great slice, but it doesn't make pizza only along the lines of what he grew up with, he's updating the process.

Fortunately for us, Scarr's pizza is just down the street from the Tenement Museum. Though it's only three years old, it's quickly become a standard bearer of the old-school New York slice, but with a contemporary twist.

As Scarr explained on a cloudy morning at his shop, he traces his love of food back to his parents, who both immigrated from the Dominican Republic, and met here in New York.

Scarr: My dad came here in 1969 or 70, I'm not sure. And My mom came like two or three years after. They actually met here in New York, in Manhattan, in Washington Heights.

Yeah, my mom is, I mean I'm not saying that because it was my mother cause everyone's like, well my mom's the best cook in the world. My Dad is one of five, my mother's one of five and they had like a million kids each. So, it was like, you know, we're, we're large family on both sides. So, whenever we would have a function on both sides of my family, they would make my mother cook most of the meal.

Brendan: Scarr's early memories of pizza made me realize just how much the food had been absorbed into the fabric of America.

Scarr: I mean, my first pizzeria was a place called Theo's. It was on the northeast corner of 138th street and Broadway. And the guys that owned it were Greek, I always assumed they were Italian. My grandmother knew the owner, and she was like, no, he's Greek. The guy feels like old Greek guy that owns the pizzeria and the guys working there were Greek as well and not for, I mean I thought the pizza was insane. You know, the way they used to serve it to go, they would fold it in half, throw it in the paper bag without a plate, just wax paper folded in half. We eat it when we get home and it was kind of pissed me off because all the cheese was stick together, but it was still amazing. It was like, it was an amazing piece of pizza.

Brendan: Scarr began working in kitchens two decades ago. And one of his first gigs happened to be... at Lombardi's.

Scarr: I was like the first, I think Latino waiter ever at Lombardi's so before that it was not, there was no brown, but I was like, I think the first one. And it was good. I started watching the kitchen. There was a guy named Ariel that used to make pizza, just came out of jail and he was dating one of my best friend's mothers. So, we was like, we were a tight family. So, he would just teach me stuff. I was like, oh so how do you do this and how to do that? I mean, yeah you do this, you do that. I was like, okay cool. Could I put one in? And he's like, no, cause they were - Lombardi's is so busy. Like if I made them, I didn't have time to like put it in cause I made a mistake. They had to clean the oven, do all this stuff and then shut it down for a sec. Well they got all this shit out, let it burn and then get off. So he was like, no, no, no. He said, we're going to do this slowly. I was like, all right, so a little by little. Then he left and another pizza guy showed up and then he started showing me a little, little, they let me fool around back there a little bit, so that's when I got my first taste and I was like, all right, I want to do pizza.

Brendan: Finally, three years ago, Scarr opened his own shop. In a sense, it's very old-school: he offers limited toppings, and the vibe is spartan: stained glass lighting fixtures that remind me of the Pizza Hut days of my childhood dim lighting, a handful of huge framed movie posters, like the cult classic *Belly*, a cozy L-shaped bar with vinyl covered stools. The quality of the ingredients, however, is of utmost importance, especially the wheat in the flour, some of which has been milled in the basement.

Scarr: You know, then I started watching my mom before I opened the shop. It's just a little thing she does. She goes to a butcher, she gets her meat she likes, she knows the things that she's always done. Like she's not about buying crappy stuff, you know, she took pride in what she

would do and she didn't want to serve garbage to her kids, you know, or family. And I feel like the same way, like I treat people in the neighborhood. Like they're my family so I don't want them to eat crap. I mean that we have here in the States, people don't understand that they use peroxide to make it white. It's not natural for flour to be white. you might not have the chemicals but the flour has zero nutritional value, like you're eating empty calories. The flour has zero nutritional value. Like you're eating empty calories. So that's why I mill flour downstairs. So, it's beneficial. Yeah. You're paying \$3.50 for a slice here. Yeah. People think - some people think, oh it's crazy. I'm like, yeah, but where can you get a slice of pizza where they milled their own flour?

Brendan: So, what does authentic mean for Scarr and his pizza? As he explained, it's about keeping things simple.

Scarr: We're an evolved in New York Shop. It shouldn't be like, okay, this pizza's more artisanal or more, uh, what's the new term they use now? They use "elitist" because they put like fancy toppings on it, but people are like, yo dude, all right. They might put that fancy topping or they might go to a farm local farm and get like that fancy cheese and put it on that slice. But where is the sauce coming from? Where's the tomatoes coming from? Where is the flour of the dough coming from? You know what I'm saying? It's like people don't ask those questions. They just zoom in on that topping. They're like, this is a place that has the, you know the arugula with the spicy salami slice. When I spend money on food, I'm going to know, I want to know where this is coming from.

Brendan: Should it seem strange that the son of Dominican immigrants is one of New York's hottest pizza chefs? In the end, Scarr's approach represents both an evolution and a return to form of the original New York Slice. It's emblematic of a food, and a city, that is constantly changing. But it was unheard of at the time. It was like – I think it was a little over...almost twenty years ago there was wasn't a Spanish kid making pizza. Still, people had this thing in their head where only Italians made pizza, New York, New York style pizza and I'm like, I haven't had an Italian person make me or give me a slice of pizza in New York. But it's not like New York style pizza is not an Italian, it's like a New York thing. It's like it's one of food those things where anyone could come in, open up. Like most, most of the slice shop owners now in New York City are not Italian. The majority of them aren't. They used to be but not, not anymore. The Italians first introduced it, but in the last 50, 60 years or longer - 80 years, it's been mostly non-Italians making pizza in New York.

Brendan: Remember those reformers we talked about earlier? They kind of failed. Not only did immigrants not give up their favorite foods and flavors, but pepperoni and garlic, and pickles, and yes – pizza have become staples of the American diet. The reformers failed to Americanize the immigrant stomach not because immigrants were stubborn, but because they couldn't have predicted how incredibly all-embracing America's dynamic food culture would prove to be. American food is as diverse as the people who call this country home, drawing influences from all across the globe.

In many ways, talking to Scott and Scarr has challenged my own assumptions about pizza. I had no idea how authentically American pizza really is – it's something that didn't travel to the US unaltered from its origins, but changed many times along the way as it responded to new communities, new ingredients, and new ways of eating. Just like people did. What other foods, not so widely known now, will be America's next adopted and adapted food tradition? Something to think about next time you see something new in a co-worker's lunchbox, or catch an intriguing whiff of something cooking in a neighborhood restaurant you've never tried before. Give it a try. Maybe you'll help make something once considered 'foreign' into a new American food tradition.

Join us next time for a conversation about how women have fought for a right to vote throughout American history.

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I'm Brendan Murphy. Thanks for listening.