

A slice of variety in LTCC kitchen

By Susan Wood

Turkey at Thanksgiving may be considered the ultimate as a food for gatherings. But no other dish is more popular as a communal meal than pizza.



Dan Kramer educates Lake Tahoe Community College students about pizza. Photo/Kathryn Reed

That's why it made for an ideal culinary class at Lake Tahoe Community College this fall. It comes with a warning though. Go to class with an appetite.

My class of about a dozen students ended up making so many pizzas and calzones in the three four-hour sessions that we stayed late to finish cooking the first night. On the second evening, I was grateful for wearing loose pants. Then, I learned. After the last session, I took enough leftovers home to feed most of my coworkers the next day.

And if you're like me, you'll learn a few things. The first night was launched with a bit of fascinating history from instructor Dan Kramer, who runs the college kitchen with a penchant for making pies.

Pizza's evolutionary past remains as varied as its toppings and styles, according to New York author Ed Levine, who wrote "Pizza: A Slice of Heaven." Of Italian descent from a bastardized version of the Latin word picea, King Ferdinand IV built a pizza oven in the 1700s for his wife, Maria Carolina, the sister of Marie Antoinette. But royalty aside, its origins are rooted as an inexpensive peasant food.

Pizza hit American ovens first in a New York City grocery store in 1905, Levine explains. Seven years later, Joe's Tomato Pies specialized in the fun food, which quickly spread through the East. In 1943, Chicago got a hold of the idea. Then the chains popped up about a decade later, partly fueled by a demand from American soldiers returning home from Italy during World War II.

Now pizza is an easy phone call away. Americans eat 350 slices of pizza per second, according to about.com.

But as I soon learned, nothing compares to the nurturing of a yeast mixture and punching a well in a bowl of flour to make your own dough. There's a variety of dough including basic, whole wheat and cornmeal. The trick is timing – starting the dough before worrying about the sauce and toppings.

The first evening, I was in a foreign land, not only in an industrial kitchen, but also in making dough from scratch. My baking experience revolves around a Betty Crocker box and pizza dough that is premade. Focaccia dough for a Sicilian recipe was out of my vocabulary. However, what I lacked in experience I made up for in ambition – blind, as it may have seemed.

My confidence level rose with my dough in the second session.

Plus, I was teamed up with two experienced cooks – Kae and Hannah. Our mission: an eggplant calzone with four cheeses and a stuffed spinach pizza. None of us is crazy for eggplant, but we did enjoy the accomplishment of working on our recipes, along with tasting the variety of calzones and deep-dish pies that other chefs brought out of the ovens. Spinach and feta, zucchini-stuffed and Italian sausage – which the class churned out that night from the grinder – rounded out the list.

My favorite dish came from the team of Julie, her daughter, Sage, and Karen.

“This could be a picture on any Chicago deep-dish menu,” Kramer said, throwing out the ultimate compliment of the night as he carved individual pieces for the class.

Kramer was full of kudos on the last night, when the class took him up on the creativity challenge of making California-style pizza.

“This has been my most creative class,” Kramer said.

Students tackled the caramelized onion and Gorgonzola, barbecued chicken, spanakopizza, pesto, smoked salmon and Brie, and their own free-for-all version of pie. Our trio’s task involved dessert – a chocolate and strawberry pizza made with sweet dough smothered in chocolate sauce and my addition of crumbled vanilla wafers for texture. I never thought of pizza as a pastry until now, but the concoction won me over. And it’s quick.

The night included a hands-on lesson in grilling pizza dough. Let’s put it this way: one can’t walk away from the stove for this type of pizza making. Watching a blaze or two that others were managing on the grill triggered my memory of having something of my own in the oven.

“The pizza,” I said, turning to Hannah. We sprinted to a back oven where an overdone crust edge had me sighing relief that

the whole thing didn't go up in flames. Sweet dough cooks faster because of the sugar content.

The culinary department of the college includes a variety of classes that range from food and wine and cheese pairing to soups and Mexican dishes. I've nibbled at five of the offerings. A sushi class has been added, too.

For now, those wanting to venture out of their comfort zone with an unusual holiday dessert may want to try the following recipe:

Chocolate and Berry Pizza

Sweet dough recipe (see below)

Vegetable oil or cooking spray

About 3 cups ripe raspberries or strawberries

Sugar

Melted unsalted butter for brushing crust

1 lb. cream cheese cut into small pieces

About 1C chocolate sauce

Fresh mint sprigs for garnish

Sweet Dough

Add 1 cup sugar with the flour and reduce the salt to $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon in the yeast and water mixture. Substitute canola or other bland vegetable oil for the olive oil.

Make sweet dough and set aside to rise as directed. About 30 minutes before baking pizza prepare an oven and preheat to 500 degrees. Brush a pizza pan with oil or coat with spray and set aside. As the pizza must be removed from the oven before the crust is completely set, do not bake directly on a stone or

tiles.

In a bowl, lightly sprinkle the berries with sugar to taste and set aside, stirring occasionally, until needed.

On a lightly floured surface, roll out or stretch the dough and shape it as desired. Place the dough on the prepared screen or pan. Prick the dough all over with a fork and brush it with melted butter.

Transfer the pizza to the preheated oven and bake until the crust just begins to brown, about five minutes.

Remove the pizza to a work surface and top with the cheese, leaving a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch border around the edges. Return the pie to the oven and continue baking until the crust is golden about five minutes longer.

Meanwhile, gently heat the chocolate sauce and drain the berries.

Remove the pizza to a wire rack and drizzle the warm chocolate sauce over the cheese. Arrange the berries over the cheese, then transfer to a cutting tray or board and lightly brush the edges of the crust with melted butter. Garnish with mint sprigs. Slice and serve immediately.

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