

## **Taste test: The best frozen pizza is...**

***Check out the results of RedEye's entirely unscientific but decidedly delicious frozen pizza taste test. Our method was simple: Pick five frozen pizzas at random, bake them and then scarf them down. Here are the results and a sampling of comments from our pizza posse.***

Jihan Palencia loves dining out. She's also cool with having meals delivered. But when the Jefferson Park resident recently made plans for a summer wedding, she needed to compromise on her food budget.

Palencia's solution? Stock up on frozen pizza.

"The 3-for-\$10 frozen pizza from Jewel is not as exciting as delivery or eating at a restaurant, but it works for me," said Palencia, 28, whose freezer stash includes cheap and convenient generic brands produced by stores such as Jewel or Dominick's, as well as more expensive brand names such as Tombstone and Red Baron.

While frozen pizza might not be ready to challenge ramen noodles as the budget meal of choice, it certainly is enjoying a boom in popularity. Sales of frozen pizzas--particularly private brands created by chain grocery stores--have jumped during the past decade as the hungry masses warm up to the pizzas' improved quality and variety, not to mention potentially significant savings over those pies that were once delivered to their homes.

Frozen pizza sales rocketed to \$4.4 billion in America last year from \$3.1 billion in 2000, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported this week, citing market research by Datamonitor Inc. That's bad news for national delivery chains. Third-quarter earnings were down in 2009 compared with the 2008 numbers for Domino's (6.5 percent decline), Pizza Hut (12.9) and Papa John's (5.7), according to financial statements from the companies.

Researcher Harry Balzer attributes the shift in pizza consumption to a new generation of restaurant-style frozen pizzas that can hold their own against those from fast-food delivery pizza chains.

"Now pizza is returning to its roots as something you make inside the house," the consumer marketing expert from research firm NPD Group told RedEye.

Improved technology and new features in frozen pizza have been popular with the public, according to Jim Storer, a sales manager for Nation Pizza Products, a Schaumburg-based distributor of frozen pizzas, along with their components such as dough, sauce and toppings. Storer says higher-quality ingredients, better flavor variety, stuffed crusts, ooey-goey melted cheese and dough that is cooked for the first time in your oven (instead of coming pre-cooked) have "really changed the way people think about [frozen] pizza." Or, as Palencia put it: "You almost forget it came from your oven."

Yet for some self-professed pizza purists, frozen pies aren't even up for discussion.

"I doubt I will ever buy frozen pizza. Ever," said Francisco Quinteros, the 30-year-old founder of the Chicago Pizza Club, which has 14 equally enthusiastic members that meet regularly to sample the Windy City's best pies. "There's no way a giant corporation making a product that is stored in the freezer is ever going to be comparable to a decent cooked-to-order pizza."

When Quinteros and his fellow club members challenged themselves last April to review 10 frozen pizzas from the grocery store, every brand got the thumbs down. Make that 14 thumbs down.

"We just think that when you live in Chicago, why would you settle for a pizza with crust that tastes like the cardboard it came on, ketchup-like salty sauce or cheese and meat that is like plastic?" said Quinteros, who lives in Humboldt Park. "The only people I know who eat frozen pizzas are eating them at like 4 a.m. when it really doesn't matter at that point."

Well, someone is digging in--sales of private-label brands (produced by chains such as Walmart, Jewel, Dominick's and Target) have risen more than 20 percent in the past year. "You have to hand it to those guys, because one of the greatest innovations in marketing was getting someone to deliver pizza to you," said Balzer, who has studied how Americans eat for more than 30 years.

Though no Chicago-specific sales numbers are available, Balzer said the U.S. frozen pizza market is on the right side of history due to consumers' changing preferences and scaled-back household budgets.

"A lot has changed in this [industry] over the years, but essentially pizza is three things: cheap, tasty and easy," he said. "What more does someone want from their food?"

ERIN M. SARRIS IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.

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## 25 Comments

[Caleb Gardner](#) said:



I only have eyes for Home Run Inn.

Posted on [January 8, 2010 3:38 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



This taste test was the first time I'd had Home Run Inn, and I was mighty impressed. I also was impressed how much I liked the Tombstone cheese pizza--for a cheese pizza, anyway.

Posted on [January 8, 2010 3:42 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[cyanyde](#) said:



i really like the vegetarian home run inn pizzas but they are SO expensive i might as well just order out. I like tombstone light veggie pizza. the crust is so crispy and it has a ton of veggies. plus its only \$2.50 usually so you cant really complain.

Posted on [January 8, 2010 3:57 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Jimmy Greenfield](#) said:



The Tombstone Brick Oven style is No. 1 in my family, and in my stomach. Reggio's is also solid with a good buttery crust.

In other news, I'm fat.

Posted on [January 9, 2010 8:43 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



No, Jimmy, you're pleasantly pizza-filled. So am I.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:49 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[magister](#) said:



Tombstone's garlic bread version is well worth your time. Haven't had a Reggio's in a while, but I have been know to partake of that.

Alas, there is no frozen stuffed spinach.

Posted on [January 9, 2010 1:16 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Jeanne Hamilton](#) said:



Hey Magistar....there IS A VERY GOOD Stuffed / deep dish pizza at Jewel, dominicks, etc. Look for the Gino's East Spinach Pizza. Theyr're huge! 2 lbs. I thin kthey're on sale right now at Jewel. Goos stuff....lots of spinach & garlic.

Posted on [January 9, 2010 2:59 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



BIG fan of the Gino's pie, but it takes like 45 minutes to bake. Tasty things come to those who wait, I guess.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:37 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Jeanne Hamilton](#) said:



Are you kidding me? Nice test! Why not test drive a Yugo, a nice Chevy, then a \$100,000 mercedes and tell us which drives best? First, you picked the WRONG Gino's

East pizza. The 32oz. original deep dish pizza at grocery stores is by far the closest to fresh restaurant quality on the shelf. Any "economy" priced or quality pizza, while good, is not going to compare to the "premium" (Home Run Inn) or "super premium" (Cal. Pizza Kit.)

I CHALLENGE the guy from the Chicago Pizza Club to bake up ANY of the huge Gino's East DEEP DISH (not thin crust) Pizza found at I think most grocery stores here. Try testing super premium vs. super premium and so forth. Hey, I think I'll drag race the Yugo vs. the V8 Mercedes now. Throw out your results and re-test.

Posted on [January 9, 2010 1:34 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



Jeanne, thanks for weighing in! The funny thing is, there were some people in this taste test who didn't like the "premium" pizzas but loved the "Yugos." Just goes to show how everyone's taste is different.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:40 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Jeanne Hamilton](#) said:



Hey Mr. Chicago Pizza Club guy....are you saying local favorites like Home Run Inn and Gino's East deep dish pizza all suck?

Maybe you don't know how to bake them up properly because they are DAMN tasty. Extra credit to the Gino's East deep dish...any of them.

They have a new one out "Spinach & Garlic" deep dish. Tasty. But if you can't bake them right, then you're being negative to local, Chicago pizza for no reason. Like the writer who wrote this article, the Chicago Pizza Club ALSO needs to re-test.

Posted on [January 9, 2010 1:38 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Message from Montie](#) said:



I wouldn't have picked any of these five. Reggio's Pizza would be my second choice. But Connie's Pizza is the most phenomenal pizza I've ever eaten. I was very disappointed when Walmart and Dominick's stopped stocking it. Then I switched to Amy's vegetarian style pizza.

Posted on [January 10, 2010 12:45 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



Montie, I'll definitely have to try those brands next time I see them!

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:46 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Bob wisz](#) said:



You have got to be kidding!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Why just look at these mass produced pies. You are talking about 3 Kraft products in the hallowed land of Chicago pizza. Oh yeah you missed one,  
Doreens gourmet Frozen Pizza. OK,I won't yell to much, no you cannot find it in Jewel or Dominicks. The independent stores like Strack and Van tils, Walts or petes carry it. Sausage Jalapeno makes a cold beer go down real easy. Fresh italian sausage not the precooked stuff, Only thing like it out there. Pizza just like the old pizzeria. Ok, so I now admit, I own Doreens, but we are the fastest growing frozen pizza in Chicago for a reason. Now in 125 Grocery stores and 500+ bar and grills.  
OK Tribune, how about a challenge?  
\$1000 entry fee Money goes to the winners favorite charity,  
TASTE TEST FROZEN PIZZAS -Thin crust Sausage only- That is chicago's best seller. That way we will know for sure.  
We will post the challenge on our Website, Doreensgourmetfrozen pizza.com

Posted on [January 10, 2010 11:32 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



Bob, thanks for weighing in! You're in an interesting position to comment. What makes a good frozen pizza--and what makes your pizza so good? And, perhaps most importantly, which beer pairs best with frozen pizza?

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:58 AM](#)  
[Reply](#)

[Bob wisz](#) said:



Best beers with a Doreens Sausage Jalapeno Pizza  
Any Three Floyds or my favorite is a Fosters oil can.  
I think a local brewery or Beer brewing club should  
Host a Pizza cookoff. Tribune/redeye sponsor-Beerclub  
Host..... now we are talking about a real Event.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 8:29 PM](#)  
[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



My stomach purrs at the thought ...

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:50 PM](#)  
[Reply](#)

[musicmaker](#) said:



I actually enjoy the Gino's Sausage Pep and just plain Sausage pizza. For 3 pizzas for \$10 or even 12 at Jewel its great!! The crust was crunchy and pizza was not greasy. Just look at the cardboard circle. Dont know what you tried Steph. I also like the Home Run Inn Sausage but it has more oil and was more expensive. Tombstone only after 10 beers at 2AM. Digornio too much dough and CPK is ok if your on a diet. BTW try Deep Dish Gino's thats a real pizza.

Posted on [January 10, 2010 3:20 PM](#)  
[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



Musicmaker, that's funny. Maybe we should do a story about which frozen pizzas are good for lunch, dinner or after 10 beers in the wee hours of the morning.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:48 AM](#)  
[Reply](#)

[Jeanne Hamilton](#) said:



Any Gino's East 32oz. deep dish pizza over HRI and certainly those national brands. Not only that a great value. Dare to compare price per ounce - Gino's East at the grocery store has them all beat value and quality wise. The trick though is knowing how to properly bake those 2 pounders up the right way. Took me and my husband 2 tries but gald we hung in there. Now have it down to a science. Trick is to rotate pizza in oven half way thru baking and when its done, take out of oven and let sit 5 minutes BEFORE cutting. Makes all the difference int he world between restaurnat quality and messy at home quality. Messy cuz Gino's East stuufs their deep dish with cheese, topping and sauce. Getting hungry now.

Posted on [January 10, 2010 5:45 PM](#)  
[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



Jeanne, that's an interesting trick to home baking the deep dish, but I can't figure out why that would make a difference in an oven?

Posted on [January 11, 2010 10:51 AM](#)  
[Reply](#)

[hbielawski](#) said:



How dare not include Chicago frozen pizzas in this. Have you ever had a Doreens Frozen Pizza? How could be a objective writer without doing research into frozen pizzas made in Chicago. Kraft products! That is like doing a tasting on what is Chicagos best beer and only tasting Miller and Bud. Which is the best hot dog in Chicago Oscar Meyer or Ball Park.

Posted on [January 11, 2010 3:53 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Mike Hines](#) said:



hbielawski, thanks for commenting! What are your fave frozens?

Posted on [January 11, 2010 4:56 PM](#)

[Reply](#)

[Kramerica](#) said:



Without a doubt you have missed the boat on Doreen's. There isn't a pizza out there that taste more fresh and Chicago authentic. Feels like you're eating it in a pizzeria. Choose the sausage and jalapeno. I promise you, you won't be disappointed. I second everything that's been said about considering local Chicago pizza makers first - always and forever! We must support our local guys. Buy Doreens - you'll LOVE it.

Posted on [January 12, 2010 9:23 AM](#)

[Reply](#)

[leebie](#) said:



I have to agree with the previous posts. I think Chicagonow should conduct some kind of comparison between Chicagoland based pizza manufactures. I have had Doreen's Pizza and it is quite tasty. I also appreciate Tombstone, however this is mainly due to that its usually on sale.