



[News Home Page](#)

[Print Edition](#)

[Front Page](#)

[Front Page Image](#)

[Inside the A Section](#)

[Nation and Politics](#)

[Editorial Pages](#)

[World](#)

[Business](#)

[Metro](#)

[Sports](#)

[Style](#)

[Previous Editions](#)

[Sunday Sections](#)

[The Extras](#)

[Weekly Sections](#)

[- Washington Business](#)

[- Health](#)

[- Food](#)

[- Home](#)

[- Tech Thursday](#)

[- Fast Forward](#)

[- Weekend](#)

[- Real Estate](#)

[- Religion](#)

[Subscription Form](#)

[Nation](#)

[World](#)

[Metro](#)

[Business](#)

[Washtech](#)

[Sports](#)

[Style](#)

[Education](#)

[Travel](#)

[Health](#)

[Home & Garden](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Weather](#)

[Weekly Sections](#)

[News Digest](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Archives](#)

[Site Index](#)

[Help](#)

Foraging

In (Surprising) Defense of the Designer Pizzas

By Kathleen Stanley

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Traditional pizzas: The freezer cases in stores are full of them. But as pizza restaurants evolve to offer diners alternatives to the traditional pies topped with tomato and cheese, sausage or pepperoni, so does the freezer.

And so we've noticed the exotic ingredients cropping up -- "designer" pizzas we call them.

We picked nine of the most unusual frozen pizzas we could find and fired up the oven, following each package's directions to the letter on rack position, cooking times, etc. When given a choice between a crisp or soft crust, we opted for crisp.

We went in with some avowed biases: We like traditional pizzas. And we'd rather eat a good pizza at a good pizzeria, make one ourselves or dial the phone for delivery than pull one from the freezer. We were very skeptical that any of these froufrou versions could win us over. Here's what we found:

ACCEPTABLE

AMERICAN FLATBREAD IONIAN AWAKENING If your classical nomenclature is a little rusty, here's a clue: This individual-size pizza takes its inspiration from Greece, which is even more apparent once you take a bite. We liked the crust, chewy yet still crispy, and were pleasantly surprised at how each of the toppings kept its integrity. You get a nice hit of Kalamata olives, onions and feta cheese with each taste, a combination that's surprisingly good on a pizza. One of the best we tried. (About \$6.50 per 9.3-ounce pizza.) Available at Fresh Fields and Sutton Place Gourmet.

AMERICAN FLATBREAD ROASTED TOMATOES & PEPPERS WITH BLACK BEANS & CORN Frankly, we don't think that black beans and corn belong on a pizza and wondered how these ingredients would hold up from freezer to oven to plate. But this individual-size pizza, with its slightly irregular shape, was downright tasty. Vegetarians, take note: This is a fine pizza. (About \$6.50 per 10-ounce pizza.) Available at Fresh Fields and Sutton Place Gourmet.

AMY'S ORGANIC PESTO PIZZA The first thing you notice about this medium-size pizza is how colorful it is: bright green broccoli, deep red tomatoes and a crust that's flecked with lots of herbs. One bite tells you that pesto was used in place of tomato sauce, which is a little overpowering. But the broccoli was just right: still crisp, still flavorful. A choice for vegetarians who have tired of the usual mushroom, olive and green pepper options. (About \$6.50 per 13.5-ounce pizza.) Available at Dean & DeLuca and Fresh Fields.

AMY'S ROASTED VEGETABLE NO CHEESE PIZZA Oh boy, were we doubtful about the absence of cheese and its replacement -- a brownish spread that looked suspiciously like mashed-up beans. Oh boy, were we wrong. What we guessed was a bean spread turned out to be a flavorful layer of caramelized onions. Topping that were artichokes, roasted red peppers and shiitake mushrooms, a rich combination. Throw in a nice, dark crust and you've got a pizza that most everyone -- but especially vegans and the lactose-averse -- would like. (About \$6 per 12-ounce pizza.) Available at Dean & DeLuca, Fresh Fields and Super Fresh.

CALIFORNIA PIZZA KITCHEN BBQ RECIPE CHICKEN If you've ordered this CPK classic at one of its restaurants, you'll also like this take-home individual version. If you're wary of a pizza that uses barbecue sauce instead of tomato sauce, rest assured: It's really quite good. Smoked Gouda joins the predictable layer of mozzarella while red onions give it a slightly sweet taste. (About \$6 per 12.96-ounce pizza.) Available at most supermarkets.

CALIFORNIA PIZZA KITCHEN THAI RECIPE CHICKEN "Keep an open mind" we kept telling ourselves during this tasting, especially with this individual pizza, which replaces the usual tomato sauce with hoisin sauce. Carrots, bean sprouts, cilantro and green onions round out the ingredients list, making for a good overall pizza. Go figure. (About \$5 per 12.98-ounce pizza.) Available at most supermarkets.

DIGIORNO SPICY CHICKEN SUPREME This individual pie didn't look too good going into the oven -- dried out toppings, soggy crust -- but came out just fine. The "rising" crust was suitably puffy and the chicken definitely spicy, but also a little rubbery. (About \$3.70 per 13.8-ounce pizza.) Available at most supermarkets.

UNACCEPTABLE

365 ROASTED VEGETABLE & GOAT CHEESE PIZZA Imagine a bag of frozen, cube-shaped mixed vegetables dumped on a frozen crust, complete with super-sweet tomato sauce and the overwhelming taste of oregano, and you've got a picture of this loser. (About \$3.70 per 15-ounce pizza.) Available at Fresh Fields.

WOLFGANG PUCK'S SPICY CHICKEN PIZZA Surely, all 10 offerings in Puck's line of individual frozen pizzas aren't *this* bad. The chef who practically invented the notion of "designer" pizzas would

undoubtedly reject the one we plucked from the freezer case. Awful chicken, awful crust and nary a glimpse of the promised pesto sauce. (About \$6.50 per 10.75-ounce pizza.) Available at Fresh Fields.

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