

By Bobbie Hasselbring

My-O-Pizza-Pie, Omaha



From above top: The meatball pizza is a customer favorite at Frank's Pizzeria. Don't miss out on Dante Ristorante Pizzeria's other offerings like these super-rich chicken liver crostini with duck-fat-fried bread.

Gooey, cheesy goodness on a chewy crust. Who doesn't love pizza? New York, Chicago, even San Francisco offer deliciously authentic pizza. But Omaha, Nebraska? On a recent trip, I was amazed to find that Omaha, home of the University of Nebraska's Cornhuskers, also bakes up some of the best pizza in America.

Italian immigrants have made Omaha the pizza capital of the Midwest. Around the turn of the 20th century, thousands of immigrants came from Sicily and the Calabrese region of northern Italy in search of work. Many found jobs with Omaha's rail industry. By 1920, 2,500 Italian immigrants called Omaha home. They even formed a Little Italy neighborhood near the Union Pacific rail yards and Italian restaurants flourished.

Today, you can find classic, thin-crust Neapolitan pizza (aka New York pizza), thick Sicilian pizza and artisan pizza featuring local ingredients. A fun and relatively inexpensive way to explore the city is to create your own Omaha pizza crawl. Here are some of my favorites:

Frank's Pizzeria In the Linden Market shopping center, Frank's Pizzeria is an old-time neighborhood pizzeria serving thin-crust New York-style pizza. In this casual place, walls are festooned with sports memorabilia and cooks shout out numbers for the next ready pie.

Owner Joe D'Elia uses family recipes to create classic pies with crust that has just the right crunch and chewiness. The meatball/onion/mushroom pie features al dente onions, spicy meatballs and plenty of stringy cheese. The Margherita, made with mozzarella fior di latte (cow's milk mozzarella), fresh basil, olive oil and a simple sauce of crushed tomatoes, yields fresh, classic flavors. Giant 16-inch pizzas sell for less than \$20.



That's Italian!

Dante Ristorante Pizzeria's chef/owner, Nick Strawhecker (center), redefines pizza with creative toppings like crispy chicken livers.

Pitch Pizzeria In a restored brick building in the historic Dundee neighborhood, Willy Theisen, the original creator of Godfather's pizza chain, cooks up artisan Neapolitan pizzas in 1,000-degree, coal-fired ovens. Theisen says the super-hot ovens have a "sweet spot" that gives the crust a satisfying char. They use Italian San Marzano tomatoes and imported '00' Italian flour and plenty of local ingredients. They also grind their own sausage and make all their own sauces, which gives their pies fresh, vibrant flavors.

Dante Ristorante Pizzeria On the west side of Omaha, chef/owner Nick Strawhecker serves truly gourmet, artisan pizza that will make you rethink what pizza should be. Strawhecker is a master chef who has cooked all over the world and his Naples-inspired creations like pizza topped with crispy chicken livers, lemon and Calabrian chilies will make you weep for joy (really, I was skeptical too!). Be sure to check out his other dishes like rabbit roulade, chicken tortellini soup and fall-off-the-bone tender beef cheek.

What's your favorite place for pizza?

Email Bobbie at bobbie@realfoodtraveler.com.



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Omaha Pizza Joints

Dante Ristorante Pizzeria, 168th and Center, 402-932-3078, www.dantepizzeria.com

Frank's Pizzeria, 711 North 132nd Street, 402-493-0404, <http://franknewyorkpizza.com>

Pitch Pizzeria, 5021 Underwood Avenue, 402-590-2625, www.pitchpizzeria.com