

# No cheese? Rhode Island's 'red strips' are an odd take on pizza

Larry Olmsted, Special to USA TODAY

Published 12:21 p.m. ET April 3, 2019 | Updated 12:33 p.m. ET April 3, 2019



## Rhode Island's 'bakery pizza' doesn't come with cheese

**The scene:** Great American Bites has tried many of the nation's [regional pizza specialties](#), from New York to New Haven style, Chicago deep dish to Detroit pan, ultra-thin cracker-crust St. Louis pizza to crispy Neapolitan classics. But perhaps the most unusual – and least known – major style is exclusive to Rhode Island. While it is virtually impossible to find outside the Ocean State, "bakery pizza" is ubiquitous within its borders.

As the name suggests, this style of pizza is found not in pizzerias but in bakeries, including the bakery section of just about every supermarket in the state. But it traditionally comes from small Italian bakeries, which also sell a stunning variety of cakes, cookies, breads and often calzones or other stuffed dough products in the pizza family. Some even sell more traditional pizza, too. But bakery pizza is the constant, and while every place does it slightly differently, the first thing that sets it apart from all other kinds of pizza we've tried is that it is almost always served just as you find it – at room temperature.

**Reason to visit:** To fill a void for pizza lovers.

**The food:** Bakery pizza is so odd that those who are not from Rhode Island might even argue that it doesn't meet the basic definition of pizza, since it generally lacks one of the three main elements: cheese. So, if it's easier for you think of it as focaccia, go ahead, but either way, try it. It is a very satisfying, even slightly addictive comfort food. In fact, it reminds me of one of the world's great regional delights, something I had for breakfast just about every day in Spain: "Catalan tomato bread," a thick tomato sauce served at room temperature which you spread on sliced bread with some olive oil and devour.

Basically, Rhode Island bakery pizza is a rectangular tray of baked dough covered with tomato sauce. It has a thicker crust than most other pizzas – but thinner than New York Sicilian-style pizza – and the sauce is very thick, almost a paste. Some places sprinkle a little grated cheese on top, but you can forget about a layer of melted mozzarella.

To confuse matters, many locals don't even call it bakery pizza – they simply call it "red strips," because the sheet-pan-size pizza is cut into rectangles. The major variant, which is not nearly as popular, is "white strips." At [DePetrillo's Pizza & Bakery](#), one of the most respected venues for the style, they offer both. DePetrillo's is one of the standard bearers for Rhode Island bakery pizza, but also sells hot triangular "regular pizza" slices and a mind-boggling array of calzone flavors. They also sell "pizza chips," which are basically snack-size versions of red strips on much thinner squares of crust. These are brilliant, the pizza lover's answer to potato chips. Less interesting is their more recent addition, "homestyle pizza," which is basically a red strip cut into squares with some grated cheese.

Their red strips are classics, and have a crispy bottom and even crisper edge, very similar to good Detroit-style pizza – except served at room temperature, and topped with a simple but seasoned thick red sauce and nothing else. The white strips have a spongier, oilier crust, more like typical focaccia, and are topped with nothing except olive oil, (very good quality) grated cheese and some herbs. I prefer the red, but you might as well try a slice of white if you stop in.



DePetrillo's has four locations, all clustered in an arc west and south of Providence. The flagship is in Warwick, which is convenient to Providence as well as major tourism destinations Newport and Narragansett. Also in Warwick, and very easily reached from (or on the way to) the city's T.F. Green Airport, is [Antonio's Bakery](#), with its own very solid rendition of red strips.

Another major player is [D. Palmieri's Bakery](#), which many believe is the state's oldest. It opened in 1905 in the traditionally Italian Federal Hill neighborhood of Providence and has since relocated to Johnston. But you don't have to visit the main production facility to try the bakery pizza, as it is carried by Dave's Market, an upscale statewide supermarket chain. It is thicker with less sauce than DePetrillo's take on the genre. The combination makes it breadier and less tasty, more like tomato-sauced bread – but it still hits the spot.

[Stop & Shop](#) is a much bigger regional supermarket chain in the Northeast, and in its Rhode Island stores they too carry red strips in the bakery section, with small quantities packaged in clear clamshell containers and larger portions in plastic bags. This is the most widely available version in the state and is very popular for parties and sports-watching at home. Stop & Shop, which makes their own, does a surprisingly good job. However, in all cases, the plastic-wrapped or otherwise sealed supermarket versions lack the crispness of strips from independent bakeries, which are usually just loosely covered in wax paper or wrapped to order.

Another famous spot is [Colvitto's Pizza & Bakery](#), which is in a Narragansett strip mall, befitting its red strips, which are unusually served warm. I asked why, but the staffer behind the counter just shrugged. Other than temperature, the slice was very similar to DePetrillo's, which is to say exemplary, a tasty crust with very thick and cheeseless red sauce. The warmed-up red strip was delicious, but the white strip wasn't cheesy enough and was not heated up. Go figure.

These are some of the most famous places to try Rhode Island bakery pizza, but there are plenty more, and the quality and stylistic variance is less than with most other foods. It is a perfect food for road tripping through New England, since it is easy to eat in the car, requires no heating and can be found all over the place. It is also shockingly cheap, so if you are driving through or visiting Rhode Island and you like pizza, you owe it to yourself to pop into a bakery or supermarket and see what the locals are so passionate about.

**Pilgrimage-worthy?:** Yes, for pizza lovers. This is one of the many uniquely American regional pizza styles that must be experienced.

**Rating:** Yum! (Scale: Blah, OK, Mmmm, Yum!, OMG!)

**Price:** \$ (\$ cheap, \$\$ moderate, \$\$\$ expensive)



With four locations, DePetrillo's makes just about every list of best spots for Rhode Island's signature "bakery pizza." This is the Smithfield location. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Unique to Rhode Island, bakery pizza is a rectangular tray of thick dough topped with red sauce, cut into strips and served at room temperature. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



While “red strips” are the main style of Rhode Island bakery pizza, some places also offer white strips. DePetrillo’s offers both, with the strips wrapped in wax paper and served – and eaten – at room temperature. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



A less common take on Rhode Island bakery pizza is the “white strip,” a lighter and less crispy crust with just oil, grated cheese and seasoning. Not every place offers these, but DePetrillo’s does. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Order as many strips of bakery pizza as you want, and they’ll bag them for you. Because they are stored, served and eaten at room temperature, there is no muss and no fuss. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



A classic wrapped red strip of Rhode Island bakery pizza at legendary spot DePetrillo’s. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY





Another offbeat variation sold at some Rhode Island bakeries like DePetrillo's is "pizza chips," basically a snack-sized take on the red strip. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



A full box of pizza chips. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



The newest offering at DePetrillo's is the "homestyle pizza," which is basically a red strip cut into squares with some grated cheese. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Another one of the most famous destination spots for Rhode Island bakery pizza is Colvito's in Narragansett. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



At Colvito's, the red strips - but not the white strips - are served warm. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



A perfect lunch: a red strip and white strip at Colvito's in Narragansett. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Not far from Providence and the T.F. Green Airport is another classic choice for bakery pizza, Antonio's in Warwick. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Dave's Market is a gourmet food store chain in Rhode Island, and they carry an array of bakery-style pizza, including their own house brand. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Dave's also distributes red strips from the legendary D. Palmieri's Bakery in Johnston. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



The array of Rhode Island bakery pizza at Dave's Market. Similar scenes can be found in just about every food store in the state. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY





Dave's Market carries their own house pizza strips, and "fancier" ones from a famous Rhode Island bakery, D. Palmieri's. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Bakery pizza is sold in full sheets, individual strips like these, and various quantities in between. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Whether you buy it at Dave's or one of the many mom-and-pop bakeries specializing in the style, a whole sheet of bakery pizza, known as a "party pizza," is usually 27 slices. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Bakery pizza is everywhere in Rhode Island, including the bakery section of major supermarket chains, the biggest of which is Stop & Shop, which sells these huge trays to go. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY



Don't need to feed a small army? Stop & Shop also sells individual red strips in bags. Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY