

Introducing Pizza Bianca

Italians have a way to create a superbly crisp, chewy crust that sidesteps the single biggest hassle of making pizza: rolling out the dough. What's their secret?

➤ BY DAVID PAZMIÑO ⇐

During a trip to Rome a few years ago, I couldn't help but notice the lines of people waiting outside local bakeries for a regional specialty: pizza bianca. Intrigued, I waited my turn. When a server handed me a piece taken from a long, rectangular plank, it looked like no pizza I'd ever seen. With no cheese or sauce—just a gloss of olive oil and flakes of salt—it looked more like focaccia than pizza. But one bite into its crisp exterior and chewy, bubbly middle and I immediately forgot all about nomenclature—even toppings. I headed right back to the end of the line for more.

When I got home I collected a few pizza bianca recipes and even spent a day working with an American practitioner of the craft, cookbook author Daniel Leader, owner of Bread Alone, a bakery in Boiceville, New York. I discovered it's made from the same basic ingredients as our familiar pizza crusts: flour, water, yeast, and salt (plus a little sugar). And the general method is no more difficult: Mix the ingredients, knead them until dough forms (we use a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook), allow the dough to rise for a couple of hours, and you're good to go. So what's the difference?

As it turns out, there's a big one: Italians use significantly more water, creating a dough so wet it's impossible to roll out. While most pizza doughs don't exceed 60 percent hydration—meaning there are 6 ounces of water for every 10 ounces of flour—pizza bianca dough ranges from 70 to over 100 percent. In Italy, pizza makers use a long-handled wooden peel, or paddle, to deposit and stretch the gloppy dough across the far end of the oven.

There was no way I was going to try stretching dough out in my own oven, no matter how good the resulting crust. But if I could simply press this very wet dough into a baking sheet—and add a few toppings to turn a snack into dinner—I might never go back to making any other kind of pizza again.

Working with Wet Dough

I was ready to get to work. I combined flour, water, yeast, and salt in a mixing bowl, opting for a hydration level around 90 percent. More water might



Classic pizza bianca, above, makes a great snack, but adding mozzarella and tomatoes (not shown) turns the same chewy crust into dinner.

make the dough gooey and difficult to handle; any less and I wouldn't get the super chewy, bubbly interior I was hoping for (see "Pizza Water Works," page 21). Though I knew wet batter would require a lengthy kneading time, I wasn't prepared for the 30 minutes it took for dough to form, even with the mixer on high. At high speed (a must for wet dough), I had to baby-sit the mixer to keep it from wobbling off the countertop. Unless I could cut down the kneading process to 5 to 10 minutes, as for other types of bread or pizza, this dough would be more hassle than it was worth.

I took a step back and thought about the mechanics of bread-making. The goal in making any dough is to create gluten, the strong elastic network of cross-linked proteins that give bread its crumb structure. Kneading aids gluten formation by bringing the protein molecules in flour into alignment so they can bind. I remembered from our No-Knead Bread recipe (January/February 2008) that a far different approach—a long rest—has the

same exact effect. In that recipe, we let the dough sit for 8 hours, which produced so much gluten, it only took a few seconds of kneading to create a loaf with a very open, chewy texture. I didn't want to wait around for a day just to make pizza, but what if I allowed the flour and water to sit for a modest interval—say, less than an hour? After experimenting, I found that 20 minutes of resting was enough to reduce the kneading time to less than 10 minutes—a perfectly acceptable length of time to stand over my mixer.

Next step in the proceedings: transferring my dough to an oiled bowl and leaving it to rise. Two hours later, the dough had tripled in volume. Though sticky, the wet dough proved remarkably easy to shape. As I pressed it out over an 18- by 13-inch baking sheet, it showed little of the "spring back" that can make firmer dough annoying to work with. And with no rolling out, I was avoiding the single biggest challenge of pizza-making: getting the dough from the counter onto the baking stone without tearing it and having to start over.

Now ready to bake, I tried our typical protocol for pizza recipes: Let the dough rest 5 to 10 minutes, then place it on a heated pizza stone positioned on a lower rack of a 500-degree oven. (I found that setting the baking sheet on a hot stone was a must for a crisp exterior.) But when I tried to remove the baked pizza from the pan, it stuck resolutely, leaving behind swaths of crust—a clear sign that not enough moisture had cooked off. The solution: I reduced the oven temperature to 450 degrees and baked the dough on the middle rack, which allowed me to leave it in the oven longer. The pizza I pulled from the oven was as golden and crisp on the outside, and as chewy and flavorful on the inside, as any pizza bianca I had sampled in Italy.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Pizza Bianca

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- What's the difference between instant and active dry yeast?
- How water amounts affect pizza crust texture

A Question of Toppings

Up to now, I had been loyal to authentic versions, adorning pizzas with nothing more than salt, a handful of rosemary (added halfway through cooking to avoid burning), and a thin coat of olive oil brushed on at the end. As good as this was, I wanted a pizza I could serve as a meal. I settled on tomato sauce and mozzarella for a variation I knew would please even the pickiest eaters in my household, and sausage for another. Adding these toppings halfway through baking was the key—spreading them over the raw dough at the beginning led to a gummy crust. Using a light hand was also essential, as too much of any one ingredient overpowers the flavor of the crust and detracts from its texture.

With the technique for dealing with wet dough perfected, and toppings successfully added, I had discovered how to adapt a classic Italian recipe for my kitchen at home. This easy, all-purpose pizza crust is one I'll return to again and again.

PIZZA BIANCA

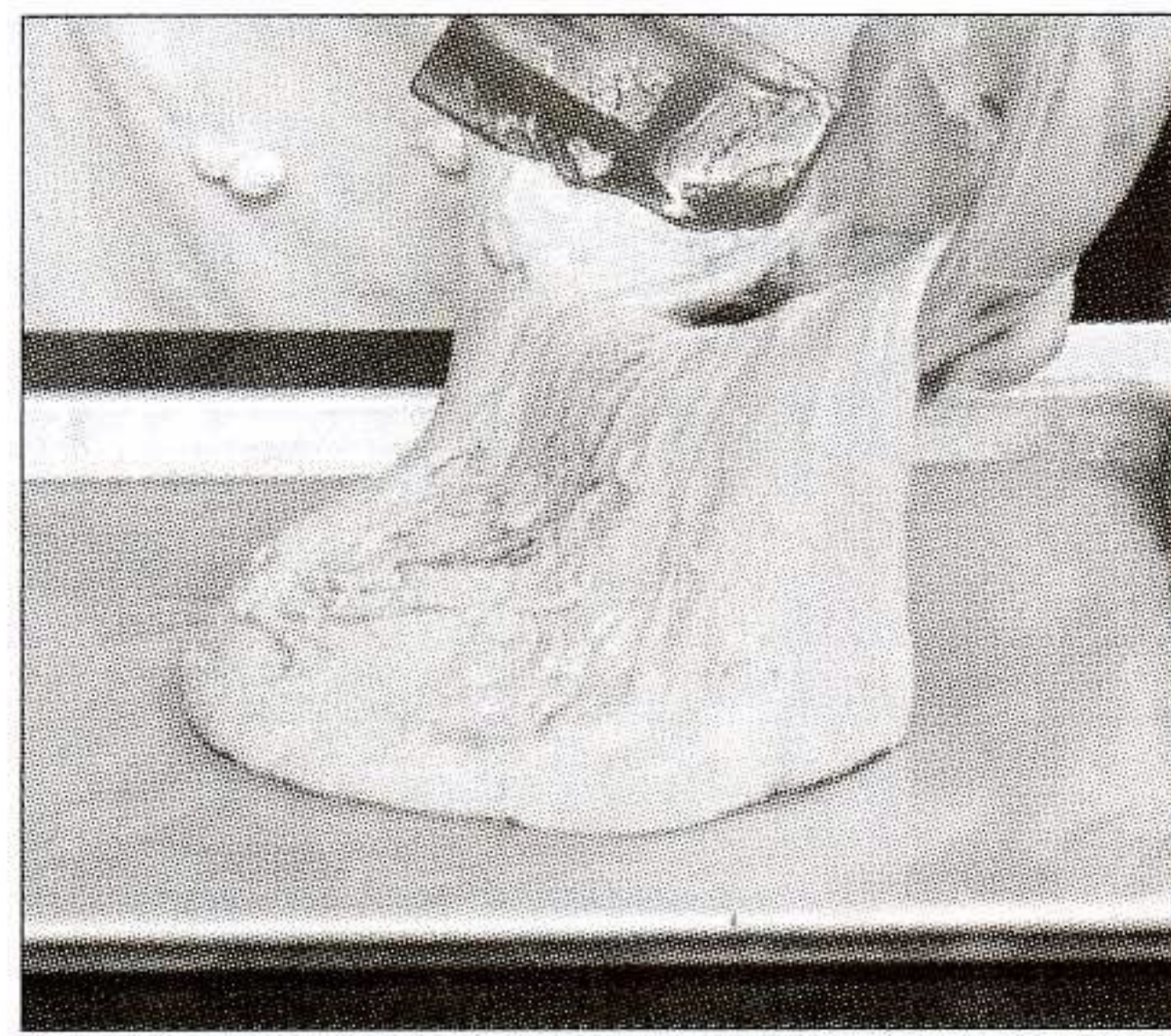
SERVES 6 TO 8

Serve the pizza by itself as a snack or with soup or salad for a light meal. Once the dough has been placed in the oiled bowl, it can be transferred to the refrigerator and kept for up to 24 hours. Bring the dough to room temperature, 2 to 2½ hours, before proceeding with step 4. When kneading the dough on high speed, the mixer tends to wobble and move on the counter. Place a towel or shelf liner under the mixer and watch it at all times during mixing. Handle the dough with slightly oiled hands. Resist flouring your fingers or the dough might stick. This recipe was developed using an 18- by 13-inch baking sheet. Smaller baking sheets can be used, but because the pizza will be thicker, baking times will be longer. If not using a pizza stone, increase the oven temperature to 500 degrees and set the rack to the lowest position; the cooking time might increase by 3 to 5 minutes and the exterior won't be as crisp. For our free recipe for Pizza Bianca with Caramelized Onions and Gruyère, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/october.

- 3 cups (15 ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1⅓ cups (13½ ounces) water, room temperature
- 1¼ teaspoons table salt
- 1½ teaspoons instant yeast
- 1¼ teaspoons sugar
- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons whole fresh rosemary leaves

1. Place towel or shelf liner beneath stand mixer to prevent wobbling. Mix flour, water, and table salt in bowl of stand mixer fitted with dough hook on low speed until no patches of dry flour remain, 3 to 4 minutes, occasionally scraping sides and bottom of bowl. Turn off mixer and let dough rest 20 minutes.

AT A GLANCE | SECRETS TO NO-ROLL PIZZA



1. The dough for pizza bianca is far too wet to roll out. Instead, pour it onto a well-oiled baking sheet.



2. Shaping is easy: Press the dough from its middle toward the edges of the pan.



3. To cook the moisture off, bake the crust on a pizza stone on the middle rack of a 450-degree oven.

2. Sprinkle yeast and sugar over dough. Knead on low speed until fully combined, 1 to 2 minutes, occasionally scraping sides and bottom of bowl. Increase mixer speed to high and knead until dough is glossy, smooth, and pulls away from sides of bowl, 6 to 10 minutes. (Dough will only pull away from sides while mixer is on. When mixer is off, dough will fall back to sides.)

3. Using fingers, coat large bowl with 1 tablespoon oil, rubbing excess oil from fingers onto blade of rubber spatula. Using oiled spatula, transfer dough to bowl and pour 1 tablespoon oil over top. Flip dough over once so it is well coated with oil; cover tightly with plastic wrap. Let dough rise at room temperature until nearly tripled in volume and large bubbles have formed, 2 to 2½ hours.

4. One hour before baking pizza, adjust oven rack to middle position, place pizza stone on rack, and heat oven to 450 degrees.

5. Coat rimmed baking sheet with 2 tablespoons oil. Using rubber spatula, turn dough out onto baking sheet along with any oil in bowl. Using fingertips, press dough out toward edges of pan, taking care not to tear it. (Dough will not fit snugly into corners. If dough resists stretching, let it relax for 5 to 10 minutes before trying to stretch again.) Let dough rest in pan until slightly bubbly, 5 to 10 minutes. Using dinner fork, poke surface of dough 30 to 40 times and sprinkle with kosher salt.

6. Bake until golden brown, 20 to 30 minutes, sprinkling rosemary over top and rotating baking sheet halfway through baking. Using metal spatula, transfer pizza to cutting board. Brush dough lightly with remaining tablespoon oil. Slice and serve immediately.

PIZZA BIANCA WITH TOMATOES AND MOZZARELLA

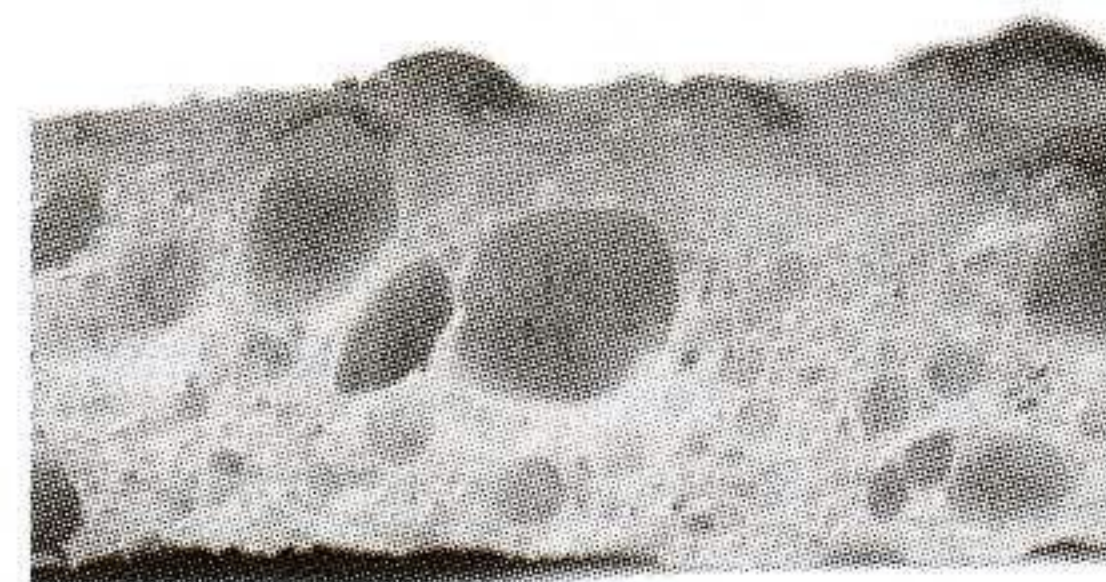
Place 28-ounce can of crushed tomatoes in fine-mesh strainer set over medium bowl. Let sit 30 minutes, stirring 3 times to allow juices to drain. Combine ¾ cup tomato solids, 1 tablespoon olive oil, and ⅛ teaspoon table salt. (Save remaining solids and juice for another use.) Follow recipe for Pizza Bianca, omitting kosher salt and rosemary. In step 6, bake pizza until spotty brown, 15 to 17 minutes. Remove pizza from oven, spread tomato mixture evenly over surface, and sprinkle with 6 ounces (1½ cups) shredded mozzarella (do not brush pizza with oil). Return pizza to oven and continue to bake until cheese begins to brown in spots, 5 to 10 minutes longer.

PIZZA BIANCA WITH TOMATOES, SAUSAGE, AND FONTINA

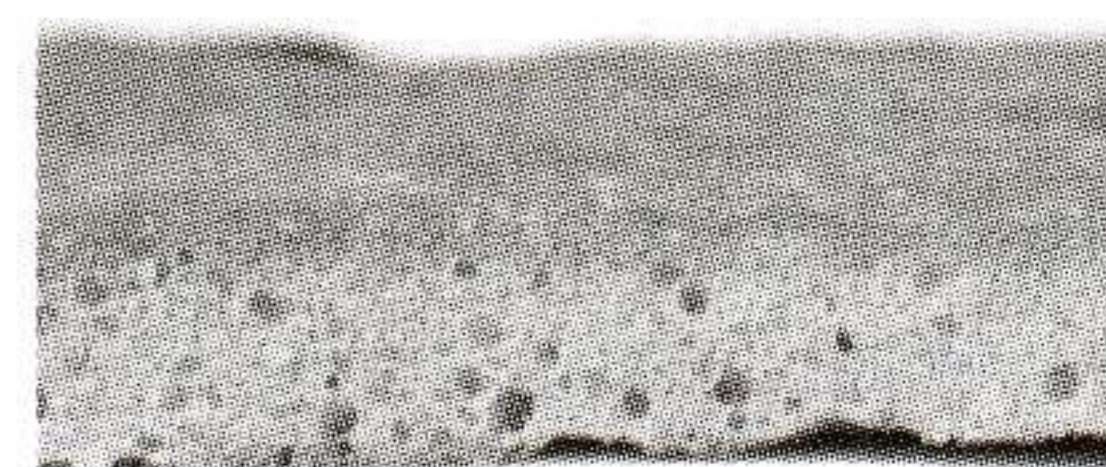
Remove ¾ pound sweet Italian sausage from casings. Cook sausage in large nonstick skillet over medium heat, breaking into small pieces with wooden spoon, until no longer pink, about 8 minutes. Transfer to paper towel-lined plate. Follow recipe for Pizza Bianca with Tomatoes and Mozzarella, substituting 8 ounces (2 cups) shredded fontina cheese for mozzarella and sprinkling sausage over pizza with cheese.

SCIENCE: Pizza Water Works

To achieve its chewy, bubbly texture, our recipe for Pizza Bianca calls for 9 parts water to 10 parts flour—an almost 30 percent higher level of hydration than in most other pizza dough. Water aids the development of gluten, the network of crosslinked proteins that gives bread its internal structure and chew. Up to a point, the more water in the dough, the stronger and more elastic the gluten strands and the chewier the bread. These strands, in turn, help to support the air bubbles formed as the dough bakes, preventing them from bursting and creating an open, airy crust.



90% HYDRATION
More water, bubblier crust.



60% HYDRATION
Less water, denser crust.