

HERE'S THE THING about pizza. It's something most of us love, a food we develop deeply personal bonds with and opinions about. For example: where I grew up in South Central Pennsylvania, pizza was simply a hand-tossed, electric oven-baked pie dressed with tomato sauce and shredded mozzarella. In Kansas City, where a good pal's from, I tried a St. Louis-style pie with a cracker-thin crust and a white processed cheese blend called Provel. When my brother attended the University of Chicago, he discovered deep dish.

Without question, pizza is many things to many people. Americans will adamantly defend their regional styles, but that's the beauty of this beloved food. Unlike those who profess to be purists — people who believe good pizza exists only in New York, or won't stretch their palates past a Neopolitan pie — I adore pizza in all its styles and incarnations. And even though I'm on the road a lot, it's pizza I typically seek out first. Why? Well, even though it's crust, sauce and cheese in its most fundamental state, what people all over the country have done with these three humble ingredients is some kind of wonderful and, in my perpetually hungry heart, absolutely worth celebrating. Here's a handy guide to noteworthy pizzas nationwide.

Pequod's Pizza, Chicago, IL
There's no shortage of deep dish in the Windy City, but what makes the pizzas doled out here so exceptional is the famous caramelized cheese crust. Before baking, a thin layer of cheese is sprinkled around the rim of the pan, yielding an irresistibly chewy and lacy texture. pequodspizza.com

Al Forno, Providence, RI
The specialty of this beloved Italian restaurant is grilled pizzas. The crust bears proper grill marks and is pull-apart chewy and subtly smoky. The crushed tomato sauce is tangy and vibrant, while Fontina cheese and shaved scallions add an unexpected refined finish. alforno.com

Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana, New Haven, CT
Today there are eight locations of this family-owned operation, but it's the original one on Wooster Street you'll want to check out. As for what to order? The white clam pie, which is loaded with chopped clams, mozzarella, garlic and olive oil. pepespizzeria.com

Joe's Pizza, New York, NY
If there's one thing New York has perfected, it's the grab-and-go slice. And the ones you can get here are arguably the city's best. No matter the time of day, you'll consistently be presented with a warm, balanced and foldable slice for a reasonable price. joespizzanyc.com

GG's, New York, NY
This is the newest shop on the list, but it's earned a rightful spot for its take on a local specialty, grandma pizza. For his version, chef Bobby Hellen double-bakes his thick crust and tops it with a deep, herbaceous sauce, Brooklyn-made mozzarella, little pepperonis and fresh basil. ggsnyc.com

Totonno's, Brooklyn, NY
Though this shop is tucked away in a nondescript pocket of Coney Island, people from the surrounding five boroughs (and beyond) still flock here for the dependably thin and crispy pies, lightly dressed with a bright tomato sauce and melty mozzarella, and crisped up in coal ovens. totonnosconeyisland.com

Domenica, New Orleans, LA
Locals and epicurean travelers alike beeline to this John Besh eatery for rustic Italian fare, like charcuterie and pastas. Naturally, the wood-fired pizzas are also solid, with styles ranging from traditional to original. (The Tutto Carne is topped with salami, fennel sausage and a runny egg.) domenicarestaurant.com

ANNE FISHERIN (PIZZERIA MOZZA); THOMAS MCGOVERN (FRANK PEPE PIZZERIA)