

The Art of Pizza

by Daniel Harris

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Chuck came into the kitchen from working in the yard. He and Marge had lived in Sarasota for only two years and it was Chuck's first exposure to semi-tropical fecundity. He wasn't sure he was doing the correct things in his yard and garden, but the locals assured him that one hacked the vegetation back to the ground and the next year it would be big and glorious. So far, his Florida neighborhoods' advice had been on the money.

—Marge, are there any sandwich fixings in the house?

Marge was polishing furniture in the living room.

—What did you ask, Chuck?

—Are there any sandwich fixings? repeated Chuck walking into the living room.

—Chuck, I just vacuumed and your tracking mud and leaves all over. Go out on the back porch and take off those shoes and pants.

—Sorry babe.

Chuck backtracked to the back door and took off his sandals and jeans on the back porch. The boyfriend of the girl next door unleashed a long wolf whistle.

—Don't stop there, Chuck, he shouted.

—Nice buns! added the girlfriend.

Funny, they didn't say anything like that when I was working bare-chested, thought Chuck. He swam an hour twice a day. He had a strong swimmer's upper body. Chuck still participated in age-group swimming meets. Marge hated when he shaved his body hair before the big national meet. She loved feeling his chest hair on her body.

Chuck went back into the house, took the vacuum cleaner and cleaned up the tracks he left on the rugs and floor.

—Sorry, Marge. I think I've redeemed myself, said Chuck returning the vacuum cleaner to the utility closet.

—You're a good man, Chuck, most of the time. But you drink too much. I was worried about you last night.

—I did over-serve myself, but I feel okay today. I'm hungry, said Chuck opening the refrigerator.

—I thought we would try out the new pizza place. I have a coupon and they have a real wood-fired brick oven. My girlfriend, Isabella, told me the pizza was pretty good.

—What would Isabella know from pizza? said Chuck switching to a thick Brooklyn-Italian accent. She grew up in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Brats yes, pizza no.

—Well, I think we should try it. Besides I need a few things at the grocery store. The new pizza place is just down the street.

—I'll give it a try, but I need a shower first.

Chuck stepped into their large walk-in shower and was adjusting the water when Marge stepped into the shower. From their earliest courtship, they often showered together. At first it was necessary because there was not enough hot water in their Cannaregio, Venice flat for two showers in a morning. It evolved into a daily bonding experience.

—What a tight butt you have, Chuck, said Marge.

—I like your womanly hips myself, said Chuck soaping Marge's body.

After they toweled off, they went into the bedroom to dress. Chuck came up behind Marge, put his arms around her and cupped her breasts. They were responsive to his touch. She nuzzled his cheek.

—Let's lie on the bed, said Marge.

Afterward Chuck was lightly stroking Marge's back.

—Marge, let's try that pizza place.

—You get the pizza. I want to luxuriate in the afterglow. The coupon is in the basket on the kitchen counter. The coupon is for a small pie. I'll make a salad. That should be enough.

Chuck dressed. He decided to take the Miata. It was a perfect early fall day.

Convection from big cumulous clouds caused a good sea breeze. Driving with the top down Chuck felt in contact with the neighborhood and the environment. At the corner he saw his sculptor friend, Alex, clearing brush from his wild Florida flora yard.

—Hey, Alex, it's about time you cleaned up that jungle.

—Always a kind word, Chuck. How are you?

—Fine, how's the art business?

—Lousy.

—Sounds like the writing business. Three rejection slips and a check for \$25 was my take for the week.

—At least you got \$25 plus you receive monthly royalty checks. I'm still waiting for the city to pay me for the sculpture piece I did in the park. If I paid my taxes that slow, I'd be homeless, but the city can take its sweet time paying me.

—Drop by for a drink later, we can cry in each other's beer. I'm going for pizza. Bring Jane.

Chuck turned the corner and zoomed down the street. The new pizza place was two miles away. He protectively parked away from the other cars and went into the restaurant.

It didn't smell like the pizza places he knew. He grew up in an Italian neighborhood in Chicago and moved to Brooklyn after he finished college. He landed a job at the *Daily News* and spent five alcoholic years following police, fire trucks and ambulances while he banged out his first novel.

He lived on the proceeds from the sale of his first book in Paris and Venice for three years. Occasionally he sold a story or travel piece to fatten his purse, but mostly he lived cheaply and wrote. That meant eating a lot of pizza. Chuck considered himself an expert on pizza. He'd eaten every kind of pizza from the most sublime to the foulest. He prided himself on the quality of his homemade pizza. He discovered in Florida you didn't want to heat up your house in the hot months. Homemade pizza was a winter thing in Florida.

—Yes, sir, may I help you? asked the girl behind the counter.

—I've heard you have good pizza, said Chuck.

—The best in Sarasota, said the girl leaning over the counter. Chuck tried not to look at her cleavage.

—Is that so? How many places have you eaten pizza?

—Well, not too many, I'm only twenty and have lived in Sarasota all my life, she said with a grin.

—So, then it's the best pizza in your experience in Sarasota?

—Believe me, sir. It's the best. She leaned her chest on the counter squeezing more of her breasts from the top of her apron.

—What are the choices?

—Plain, pepperoni, sausage, mushrooms, vegetarian, grand slam. The grand slam has everything on it.

—Hmmm. Chuck remembered Mario, the owner of Mario's Pizza in Brooklyn, telling customers that if they wanted a salad on their pizza to go to Queens.

—The most important part of a pizza is the crust, instructed Mario. Next, just a touch of fresh herb-seasoned tomato sauce made with Italian grown San Marzano tomatoes and finally chunks of homemade buffalo mozzarella...or moz-zarel as he pronounced it. No other ingredients. Do that and you will have a perfect pie.

—You can buy by the slice, explained the girl, or a whole pie. A large pie has eight slices, a small pie has six.

—I have a coupon for a small pie.

—Today is Sunday. You can get two pies for the price of one. That's a better deal than your coupon.

Chuck was having second thoughts about the quality of the pizza. Maybe he should cook the brats he had simmered yesterday for their tailgating party at the Monday night football game.

—Okay. Give me one plain pie and a second pie half mushrooms and half pepperoni.

—I should remind you that the plain pie is free; the cost is for the more expensive pie.

—That's fine.

The counter girl turned and shouted the order to the pizza man not six feet from her.

—You pay at the register and then bring the receipt back here. It will be twenty minutes.

Chuck paid and went outside to watch his car. Old geezers in SUV's and crackers in pick-up trucks were real threats to a small sports car. He always thought Massachusetts and New Jersey drivers were the worst, but Florida drivers took the prize.

Chuck took the receipt back to the counter.

—Your pizzas are coming out of the oven now, said the girl.

—Make sure they are good and hot. My wife is very particular.

The counter girl was bent over the back table slicing the pizza. She could make some man very happy or very miserable thought Chuck, checking out the curve of her hips.

—These are very hot. Thank you and enjoy the best pizza you ever ate.

—Thank you, I will, said Chuck, stuffing two bucks in the tip jar.

When he arrived home, Marge, Alex, and Jane were on their second beer.

—I see it didn't take you long to discover the beer, chided Chuck.

—Marge called us, explained Jane, and said you were going to try out the new pizza place. She invited us over.

—I brought beer, added Alex.

Marge and Jane had set up the table on the side deck, where they could take advantage of the cool sea breeze.

—Let's start with the plain, suggested Marge. Then if the pizza is too bad, we can switch to brats. Chuck simmered a dozen brats in his special beer, garlic, onion and pepper concoction yesterday.

—Yea, we're going to see the Packers slaughter the Buccaneers tomorrow night in Tampa, said Chuck.

Chuck set out a slice of plain pizza for each person.

Marge looked at Chuck. Jane looked at Alex. The all looked at each other.

—I think I better get that grill going, said Chuck.

—There is no decent pizza in Sarasota, said Jane.

—I think this pizza lowers the bar a couple of notches, said Alex.

—Well, the best brats are coming up in minutes, said Chuck, lighting the gas grill.

—Don't forget to reheat my German potato salad, said Marge.

After they had eaten the brats, Marge's German potato salad, and imbibed two more beers, the four sat around drinking a fifth beer kibitzing about proposed changes to the zoning code for their neighborhood. Finally, Marge and Jane retired to the living room to watch *You've Got Mail*. It was probably the twentieth time for both of the women.

—I don't know how women can keep watching the same stupid film over and over, said Alex.

—My mother was the same, said Chuck. I think it's a post-menopausal thing.

—Jane and her sister must have watched *Gladiator* four times in the last two weeks, said Alex.

Chuck went inside and returned with two bottles of cold beer.

—Chuck, what are you going to do with the leftover pizza? asked Alex.

—Throw it out, said Chuck.

—I just got an idea for an art project. Get the pizza and we'll go to my studio.

Chuck went into the kitchen and put the pizzas in one box.

—Marge, Jane, shouted Chuck, Alex and I are going to his studio.

—Don't stay too late, Chuck, said Marge.

—Don't start drinking hard stuff, cautioned Jane.

—We're on to you two, said Marge.

Walking up the street to Alex's studio they saw Chuck's neighbor, Portia, walking her Shetland sheep dog.

—Hello, Portia, said Alex.

Portia let go of the leash and her dog, Sparky, ran to Chuck.

—This dog loves me, said Chuck, holding Sparky who jumped into Chuck's arms, licking his cheeks.

—Chuck, how can I train him to not jump up on people, if you do that? Put him down, ordered Portia.

Chuck released Sparky, but continued petting him.

—Where are you going with that pizza? asked Portia.
—To Alex's studio, said Chuck.
—It was so bad, I decided to make a piece of art out of it, said Alex.
—Where did you buy it? asked Portia.
—The new pizza place by Paradise Plaza, said Chuck.
—That bad?
—The worst, said Alex.
—I think it's the water, said Portia. All the pizza in Sarasota is terrible.
—No, it was the crust. Tasted like they used pastry flour and no olive oil, said Alex.
—I don't know, said Chuck, I make an excellent pizza. But I have an RO filter on my kitchen water.
Sparky began barking at Portia.
—He wants to keep walking, said Portia. Good afternoon and good luck with your project.
—Thanks, said Alex.
—What a class woman. I wonder why her husband left her? asked Chuck.
—It's a long sad story you don't want to hear, said Alex.
When they arrived at Alex's studio, which was a gutted rental unit on his property, the first thing Alex did was turn on the oven of an ancient electric stove. Alex recovered an old Philco M-15 album length record player from a pile of junk in a former bathroom.
—Alex, do you know that's the first 331/3 album length record player? It might be worth some money, said Chuck.
—Well, when I'm done with my value-added features, it will be worth a lot more money, barked Alex.
Alex carefully cut and arranged the pepperoni and mushroom pie on the turntable. He put the tone arm halfway across the turntable. The needle rested on a pepperoni round. He sprayed some noxious smelling compound on the whole thing and put it in the oven.
—Beer or vodka? asked Alex.
—I should stick with beer, replied Chuck.

—How about a shot of vodka and a beer, asked Alex.

—Now you're talking.

Tuesday morning, Alex called Chuck.

—That was a great football game last night, said Alex.

—The Bucs almost pulled it off, said Chuck. Aaron Rodgers was just too good. I saw his face in my binoculars and I could tell he wasn't to be denied. The Packers scored thirteen unanswered points in the last forty-seven seconds. The Packers' were awesome. Marge, our local cheese head, can't talk today her voice is so hoarse.

—It was like the seventh game of a world series, agreed Alex.

—So, what's up? asked Chuck.

—You have to stop by the studio and see the piece I made Sunday afternoon.

—I'll be right over, said Chuck.

Alex stood on the sidewalk outside his studio.

—How did it come out? asked Chuck?

—Perfect, replied Alex.

Alex opened the door of his studio. There on a table with floodlights trained on it was what appeared to be a slightly melted vintage Philco record player playing a pepperoni and mushroom pizza.

—It's weird enough to be one of your pieces, said Chuck.

—Now I'm going to encapsulate it in a block of clear Lucite. Then it will be finished.

—What are you going to call it? asked Chuck.

—Long-Playing Pizza.

