

This is a PDF of the original blog post by Blaine Parker, which may be found at [Free The Pizza dot com](https://www.free-the-pizza.com).

What do a few famous pizza people have to say about pizza of their memories? It's kinda fascinating--and you might find yourself playing along.

Pizza Prousti: In the spirit of Proust's madeleine, pizza peeps from across the spectrum dish their pizza of memory...



**Proust**                      **Madeleine**                      **Pizza?**



A few weeks ago, I shared a [story about King Of Pizza in Cherry Hill, New Jersey](#). It's a pizza of my wife's youth, and is a pizza that triggers all kinds of pizza-related memories of her youth.

We framed the experience in the literary metaphor of Proust's Madeleine. This metaphor springs from the novel *In Search Of Lost Time*. In the book (which spans a mere seven volumes and 1.5 million words), that little, seashell-shaped French sponge cake known as the madeleine triggers a long-ago memory for

the narrator.

A classic literary food metaphor was born--and most Americans have probably never heard of it. Hello, American system of education

In that King Of Pizza post, and with a few personal emails to pizza people, we asked folks for recollections of their Proust's Pizza. Following are highlights from the answers that rolled in.

So many respondents wrote so much about pizza memories, it was evident we'd be unable to include it all. So all of the original, unedited replies to the question [may be read in all their full-length literary glory by clicking here.](#) (We'll also share that link again at the end.)

## **Pizza From The Heart Of The City Of Brotherly Love**

One of the illustrious folks to whom we posed the Proust's Pizza query was **Peter Reinhart, [world-famous bread educator, pizza guru and winner of multiple James Beard Awards.](#)** In case you don't know who Peter is (and how did that even happen?), he's the host of the Pizza Quest podcast, author of more than a dozen baking books, including three of my go-to books for pizza: *American Pie: My Search For The Perfect Pizza*, *Perfect Pan Pizza*, and *Pizza Quest*.

A true pizza geek, the first thing Peter did when asked about his Proust's pizza was re-name the metaphor in Italian: "*Pizza Prousti*." So we're running with it. And since Peter has branded *Pizza Prousti*, we're starting with his:

**"I grew up in Philadelphia in the 1950's and 1960's.** My family had two go-to pizzerias: Mama's and Pagano's. Those taste memories from Pagano's and

Mama's are imprinted onto my soul and, every once in a while, I'll taste a slice somewhere else that has a vibrant messy tomato sauce like Pagano's, or a blistering, bubbly crust with a gooey, stringy cheese pull like Mama's (which I later learned was caused by a blend of mozzarella, cheddar, and Parmesan cheeses) and I'm instantly transported back to my youth.

"This happens here in my new hometown of Charlotte, NC, where my pizza go-to places are Luisa's and also Geno D's. Luisa's triggers the Pagano's button, and Geno D's taps open the Mama's lock box. Geno D's is helmed by Geno DePaulo, originally from the Tom's River area of, NJ. He refers to his pizza as Jersey-style, which he describes as meaning, "Because I'm from New Jersey and my pizza is made with love." Okay, not too esoteric but it works for me.

Geno's pizza is baked in a conveyor Marshall Middleby "Wow Oven," which is nothing like the Baker's Pride deck oven that Paul Castelucci used at Mama's. But somehow, the resulting Geno D's pizza sets off the time machine. I am instantly back in the original Mama's Pizzeria, with its 1950's Formica-topped tables, on Main Street in Manayunk, PA (way before Manayunk became gentrified and retro-trendy). The main thing that Geno's has in common with Mama's, I am forced to conclude, *is* that it is made with love and, everything else being equal, that is all the trigger I need.

(The full and excellent text of Peter's full *Pizza Prousti* [is worth reading here](#), should you be inclined.)

## Beantown Pizza And A Heart Of Steel

Andris Lagsdin, founder of [BakingSteel.com](http://BakingSteel.com), has a homemade Proustian pizza with resonance. Tasting the pizza he makes at home on a baking steel

transports him to the early 1990s when he was a rock star chef becoming a pizzaiolo in Boston at the renowned Todd English restaurant, Figs. Baking at home on a steel for the first time, Andris says:

**“I remember the 7-minute bake like it was yesterday.** I made a Figs 12-hour dough on a Sunday morning, and baked it up later that afternoon. My only goal was to see if that pizza would bake.

“I had made a lot of pizzas at home on a pizza stone up to that point. I used the same strategy. Bake it at 500 F for about 10 minutes. I was merely trying to replicate the pizza of a pizza stone, not improve it. My expectations were minimal.

“But when that pizza cooked about 30% faster than my pizza stone on the first attempt, I was sold and super excited. I couldn't believe it. That was a one-pizza test that was the birth of the Baking Steel. That first pizza I made on a Steel will be in my memory bank forever.

“Figs at home, finally.”

### **What Do Pensacola, Domino's, Le Cordon Bleu and A Vietnamese Chef Have In Common?**

One unexpected *Pizza Prousti* comes from Cordon Bleu-trained **Chef Tuan Tran** in Miami Beach, who is Executive Chef/Owner of Fat Tacos, an operator of noted pizza popups, and runs the [\*\*YouTube channel \*Cooking With Chef Tuan\*\*\*](#). I interviewed Tuan last year because I kept seeing these extraordinary-looking pizzas he was posting on social media. There was this tuna poke pizza that I would literally wake up thinking about—and I've never

even tasted it. Tuan says:

“As an adult, I have had the pleasure of eating some of the best and some of the worst pizzas. Growing up in a Vietnamese household, we didn't eat pizza. The first time I had pizza, I was in first grade at Escambia Elementary in Pensacola, FL. There was a Domino's pizza very close to the school, and we did a field trip there. It was so close, we walked there single file

“I was welcomed by a very foreign smell to me. The smell of a pizza shop. Dough, yeast, pizza cooking in the ovens.

“Watching and learning how pizza was made was very fun and exciting. We got to make a bunch of pizzas for the class. The first slice I ate was from a pepperoni pizza.

“Up until that moment, I have no memory of ever eating pizza.

“Every time I have Dominos, it brings me back to that moment in Pensacola. That is the first time I remember having pizza.”

The rest of Tuan's story, [on this page](#), includes another commercial pizza memory I totally understand: Totino's Party Pizza.

## Pizza Memories In The Heart Of Hoboken

There is no shortage of New Jersey pizzas in the *Pizza Prousti* mix. **Stephanie Swane is Publisher/Editorial Director of [Modernist Cuisine](#)**. She has personally worked on *Modernist Bread*, *Modernist Pizza*, and their latest title, *Food & Drink: Modernist Cuisine Photography*. I figured who better to ask

about their *Pizza Prousti* than someone who's eaten pizza all over the world. (Which may have made it a much harder question for her, but what do I know?) Stephanie's Proustian pizza memory comes when she takes a bite of a legit New York white slice. That bite of pizza carries her back to Hoboken, New Jersey and a joint called Benny Tudino's:

"When you walk into the place the smell of a NY slice house hits you straight on and the oven is right when you walk in so you can see what's coming out and how many slices are in for reheat.

"Benny's was my late night spot after a show at Maxwell's, hanging out with friends at Louise & Jerry's on Washington St. or my last stop on my way home from NYC.

"The white pie was always my moment of rejoice when I would take that first bite of the slice that's the size of a pizza box, the ricotta and combo of cheeses melted in my mouth. It was a celebration of the night's accomplishments in a slice that if it was a great night or a shitty night it was always there for me.

"Moving from the West coast where slice shops were rare, this was an amazing adventure and anything open past 11pm that was good was even more difficult to find out west.

"Whenever anyone came to town it was always the spot of choice to have a slice either in one of their awesome booths to people watch, to take to-go in a pizza box and sit on a bench in the park famous from *On The Waterfront* on my way home, or the rarity waiting the 15-minute walk home to open the box to start devouring a slice.

"It's the whole package of what a NY slice shop meant to me, and still does

when I want that classic white pie slice – for over 50 years they have kept the party people of Hoboken very happy.

### Friday Family Pizza Night In North Brunswick

Another Jersey pizza comes from **Kevin Godbee, food blogger extraordinaire**. Kevin is originally from North Jersey, and presently lives in St. Petersburg, Florida. One of his several, **[hugely popular blogs is called \*Pizza Is My Life\*](#)**, which is probably a truthful statement: among other things, Kevin has produced replicas of some of the pizzas from the *Chef's Table* series on Netflix. For Kevin there are two joints—Best Pizza, on Havemeyer Street in Brooklyn, and Nicko's Pizza and Subs on 4th Street South in St. Petersburg—that take him back to his youth in New Jersey:

“My base reference point for pizza is Nino's Pizza and Subs in North Brunswick, NJ. I still remember it as the best pizza I ever had.

“Every once in a while, I'll find something just as good, and it brings me back to Friday Family Pizza Night at home with family, neighbors and friends, and at least two large pizza boxes open on the table.

“I didn't have a care in the world except where my next slice of pizza was coming from.

“Nino's was a four minute walk from the house I grew up in, and my family and I ate their pizza all of the time. Antonino “Nino” Bellavia immigrated from Sicily to Brooklyn in 1964. He moved to North Brunswick in 1973 when he opened Nino's Pizza and Subs.

“Nino retired in 2008 when his son Tony took over the restaurant, which is still there today. (I went to school with Tony. The school bus would actually drop him off at the restaurant rather than home, so I guess he was apprenticing at the time.)

“Nicko's Pizza and Subs in St. Petersburg is just 4 minutes from my house, and I had their pepperoni pizza as recently as yesterday, and must have repeated myself five times, ‘This is sooo good!’”

Kevin's [full and unedited tale](#) is here, complete with addresses to those pizza joints if you want them.

## Pizza Therapy In Rhode Island

If you know **Albert Grande**, [global pizza influencer and founder of PizzaTherapy.com](#), you know he's an all around great guy in the world of pizza. (As I write this, he's eating pizza in Glasgow and it looks fantastic.) Albert brings in one of the most interesting Proustian pizzas:

“I was born in Rhode Island, and moved to Connecticut when I was 11 or 12. All the relatives lived in Rhode Island and we would go back frequently. My favorite childhood pizza memory is Rhode Island pizza strips.

“These were thin strips of dough slathered with sauce. You could only find them in bakeries. Very unusual and very much a regional pizza.

“If I'm in Southeastern Connecticut, around Westerly and Pawcatuck, Rhode Island, there's a woman with a shop called The Pizza Lady who makes pizza strips. Jon F. is an old high school friend. Going to parties at his house, he often orders from the shop. Those pizza strips take me back to those childhood

days...”

## **New York Bedroom Communities Have Great Pizza, Too**

**Chuck Park, a fan of Free The Pizza**, chimed in immediately when the call went out. He says:

“My ‘Proustian’ pizza, my benchmark that I compare all NY thin-crust pizzas to, was from Sante's Restaurant on Central Ave in Greenville (in the Scarsdale area), New York.

“It had a simple, tasteful tomato sauce, high-quality mozzarella, and a thin leopard-spotted crust, with charred cornicione bubbles.

“Sadly, Sante's has been gone for decades, but I was lucky enough to find a restaurateur who was also a childhood fan of Sante's, and makes Sante's style pizza in his restaurant, Abbatino's in North White Plains, NY.

“The owner of Abbatino’s worked at Sante’s when he was a kid, just before it closed, so his pies are a tribute to Sante’s. It’s the whole package; the look, the smell, and the taste.

## **A Return To Philly And A Coke Out The Nose**

At the risk of seeming like a shameless and nepotistic self promoter (once again), I decided to include this *Pizza Prousti* from **Honey Parker, author of the Careful-ish series of COVID hilarity novels, which often include pizza.** Yes, she has the same last name as your faithful pizza scribe here because she’s married to him. But her story underscores several important points,

including a) pizza is people and b) Peter Reinhart's books are powerful. Honey says:

"The bite of pizza that took me back in time comes courtesy of my live-in pizzaiolo, Blaine Parker. When he made his first pizza, that first bite was a revelation. It was so much different than the pizza in LA then, and even different than New York.

"The sharpness in the cheese, the texture of the crust, the herby tomato flavor of the sauce, it took me back to a restaurant/bar in Northeast Philly called Vitale's. Think: dark wood paneling and servers who'd been there since forever. I don't remember the first time I had a Vitale's pie because it was a staple of my youth. We'd often go when we visited my dad's parents, who lived just a few blocks away.

"Thin crust, sauce on top of the cheese like a Jersey tomato pie. The sauce wasn't sweet, and the sharp bite on the cheese was completely satisfying. (I'd always add dried oregano on top of mine.) Unfortunately, the Vitale's pizza has become a memory because the recipe died along with the pizzaiolo. I know: Tragic.

"The pizza memory I most associate with Vitale's was the time my older sister and younger brother and I went on our own. She and I were legal drinking age, but my brother wasn't. After trying to order a beer and failing (the wait staff had been there forever and they all knew how old my brother wasn't), my brother was served a Coke.

"My sister was joking about his botched beer attempt. My bother, trying to contain his laughter, shot Coke out his nose and onto the pizza. That lead to more laughter, but much, much harder, the uncontrollable, breathless kind—

and, of course, ordering a fresh pizza.

“My family still waxes poetic about Vitale’s pie. It’s the standard to which we hold all other pizza. The fact that my husband has come so close to replicating it is shocking and delightful.”

**I need to throw out some props to Peter Reinhart on this one.** The pizza Honey describes was made from *American Pie* using Peter’s recipe for Neo-Neapolitan style pizza dough, and his recipe for crushed-tomato sauce. I have to believe Peter’s Philly roots have influenced those recipes, and I get to coast on his pedigree.

### How Weird Is Your Pizza?

I’ll wrap this up with a ridiculous *Pizza Prousti*. I already shared my primary, New York-style Proustian pizza in the original story, which is the long-gone [\*\*Caruso’s counter in Grand Central\*\*](#).

A different story is one summer when I was in my 20s, I was working in England. I was with a couple of guys from work, and we were in Cowes on the Isle of Wight. The pubs had just closed. We were on our way back to our accommodations and passed the chip shop, which was still open. I wasn’t really in the mood for fish and chips, but hey: Open.

I was looking at the menu board, and it said, “Pizza.” And I thought, that makes no sense. This is a chip shop. The operative word in here is “fried.” I don’t even see an oven.

The woman running the chippy asks what I want. I say, “Do you have pizza?”

She says, “How many?”

How many pizzas? I say, “Um, one?”

Without missing a beat, she dives into the chest freezer, whips out a 6-inch frozen pizza, and before I can say anything, WAP! It’s in the deep fryer.

It was fantastic.

And I’m sure that’s not just the beer talking.

(An Englishman has since told me that deep-fried frozen pizza is a thing in Scotland.)

**Here’s the commonality that was apparent right away.** Nobody playing this game has a short answer. Some answers are longer and more literary or poetic than others. But every answer is distinctive and has memories of other people involved.

I’m a rank amateur at psychology, sociology, anthropology, pizzaology and any other -ology you can throw at this phenomenon, but here’s my take: the food is potent, the memories are strong, and there are always other people involved.

From that line of 6-year olds walking to Domino’s, to the family pizza night without a care beyond grabbing the next slice, it’s all fantastic.

We’ll be revisiting this exercise. It’s too good not to. And the best thing is: There is no wrong answer to the question of what is your *Pizza Prousti*. As a bonus, you get to talk about Proust without ever having read him—either in French or English!

A multitude of thanks to everyone who played *Pizza Prousti*: Peter, Andris, Tuan, Stephanie, Kevin, Albert, Chuck and Honey. Thanks as well to the other folks whose pizzas have not yet made it into print. [You may read their full and unedited stories on this page.](#)

We're going to be revisiting *Pizza Prousti*, so if there's a pizza bite that sparks a long ago pizza memory for you, [tell us about it via the contact form here.](#)

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If you're stumbling into Free The Pizza for the first time, and you're thinking about starting your own pizza journey, few suggestions for you. First of all, [Peter Reinhart's \*American Pie\*](#) is a godsend. It got me started and remains a touchstone. My silly little book, [Free The Pizza: A Simple System For Making Great Pizza Whenever you Want With The Oven You Already Have](#), is a much different book than Peter's. It's not as comprehensive by any means, but I'm pretty sure it contains more jokes. That camouflages the fact that I really have no idea what I'm talking about. [Andris Lagsdin sells the American-made steel you need to bake pizza in a home oven at BakingSteel.com, and offers free online cooking classes.](#) And if you're advanced enough to ignore all this—or you're a raging A-type who needs such things--[consider the three-volume \*Modernist Pizza\*](#) (written by Nathan Myhrvold and Francisco Migoya, published and editorially directed Stephanie Swane) is a 32-pound behemoth in a red-steel case that will tell you everything you never knew you wanted to know about pizza. (Yes, I own it. I've read it in its entirety. [I even wrote a long, long review of it here.](#))