

Glamping in the Great Smokies



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Pie guy

RENOWNED PIZZA MASTER AND AMBASSADOR FOR ALL THINGS PIE,
PETER REINHART SOLDIERS ON IN HIS SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT SLICE.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY POPROCKPHOTOGRAPHY

For Peter Reinhart, there are only two types of pizza: Good and *very good*. “By very good, I mean *great*,” says Reinhart, baking instructor and chef on assignment at Johnson & Wales University in Charlotte, who defines greatness as pizza that’s truly memorable. “Pizza is the perfect flavor delivery system. Whether it’s the classic white clam pizza like those found at the iconic Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana in New Haven, Conn., or a sublime Margherita crafted by pizza innovator Chris Bianco at Phoenix’s Pizzeria Bianco, there are key differentiators common to truly memorable pizzas. Those are what I seek out.”

Pizza is something of an obsession for Reinhart. At 70 years old, he could be slowing down, easing into a well-deserved retirement after working nonstop for more than five decades. His love of baking and people has led to an intertwined career that marries bread-making, storytelling and teaching — and has inspired legions of students and fans from the Carolinas to California.

Instead, he’s elbow deep in dough, working on his 13th book, an homage to the current crop of America’s best artisan pizza makers. The book, due out in late 2021, has a tentative working title of *Pizza Quest: My Never-Ending Search for the Perfect Pizza Continues*. In it, Reinhart shares backstories and tribute recipes to the wave of memorable pies he’s encountered in his ceaseless cross-country hunt.





This is his third pizza book and comes nearly two decades after his bestselling classic, *American Pie* (2003), and *Perfect Pan Pizza*, a book he released last year for enthusiastic home pizza-makers hungering for the Detroit, Sicilian, Roman and grandma-style pizzas representing the latest pizza craze enchanting Americans.

What drives one of the country's foremost artisan-bread authorities (his book, *The Bread Baker's Apprentice* won the 2002 James Beard Award for Cookbook of the Year) into the relentless pursuit of pizza greatness?

Pizza, according to Reinhart, is quite simply the world's most perfect food. And that perfection begins always with the crust. "You can have the greatest toppings in all the world," Reinhart says, "but if you don't have a fantastic crust, all you have is an interesting pizza. If you have a great crust, however, with simply olive oil and salt, or sauce and cheese, it's still going to be a great pizza. The toppings are a bonus. For me, it's all about flavor synergy between toppings and crust."

It's at this intersection of artisanal bread baking, dough science and craft pizza where Reinhart has found a tribal community of like-minded independent artisans, where the sharing of knowledge, technique and respect for the craft is taking pizza in America atop the culinary Everest.

"Peter and I met shortly after he wrote *American Pie*," says Tony Gemignani, 13-time World Pizza Champion, *Pizza Today* magazine writer, master instructor and chef/owner of several pizzerias in the San Francisco Bay area. "Our industry was filled with independent pizza operators and, at the time, began a renaissance of bakers that jumped into the realm of pizza-making. Peter was one of the first to really get into this arena, he was one of the pioneers and a master at what he

does. As pizza-makers became better and really began to understand bread chemistry, the cross-over accelerated that enhancement.”

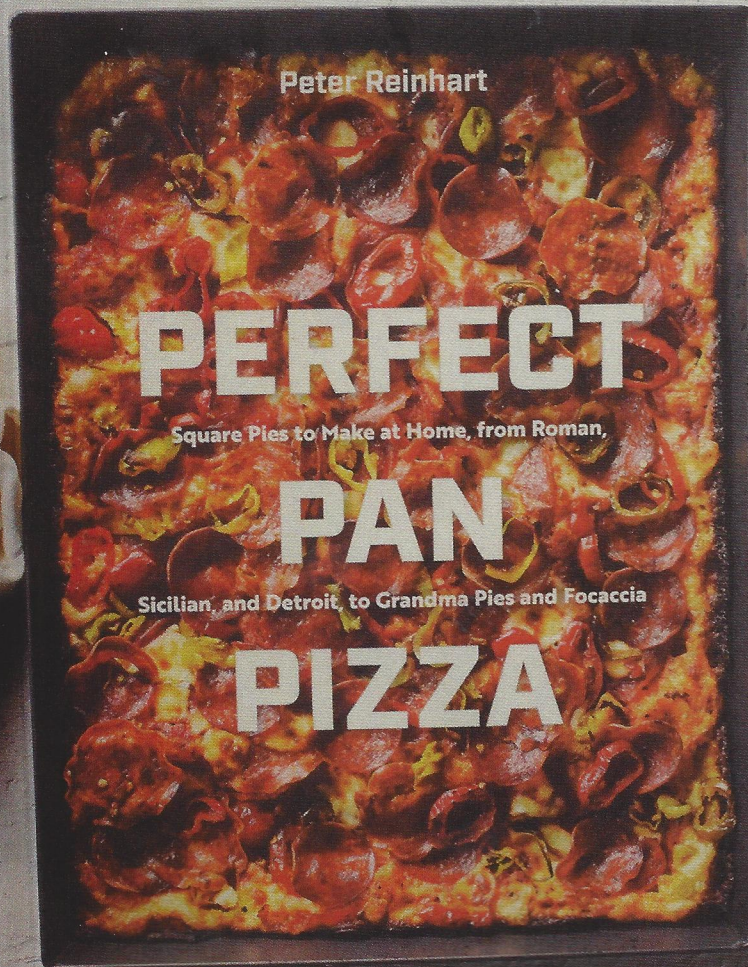
After publishing *American Pie*, Reinhart was approached by independent Los Angeles-based TV producers interested in creating a series based upon the chef’s hunt for the perfect pizza. Soon, they were shooting a pilot in California after garnering interest from a PBS affiliate in Boston. Reinhart was a natural on camera and easily engaged in breezy interplay with pizza/bread mavens such as Nancy Silverton (La Brea Bakery), Craig Stoll (Pizzeria Delfina) and Chad Robertson (Tartine Bakery).

Shortly after the project began, the Great Recession put the kibosh on series funding, and with dozens of hours of footage “in the can,” Reinhart looked to the internet as a vehicle to share content with the broad audience he knew existed.

“I found a sponsor with [wood-fired pizza oven-maker] Forno Bravo,” Reinhart says, “We launched a website, *Pizza Quest with Peter Reinhart*, re-cutting our content into short webisodes.”

What began as repurposed video content featuring a handful of California pizza-makers has grown into a decade-long online series showcasing a who’s who of pizza consiglieres. Guests and website contributors include Scott Weiner of Scott’s Pizza Tours in New York City, John Arena of the renowned Metro Pizza in Las Vegas, Chris Bianco, and Michael Shepherd, a four-time World Pizza Champion from Ohio.

As Reinhart’s pizza journey has grown, so have his relationships with pizzaiolos (pizza makers), equipment manufacturers, food companies, restaurateurs, home cooks and an expansive tribe of pizza enthusiasts. He speaks at pizza conferences and expos and is often called upon to judge competitions. In Charlotte, he’s consulted on pizza product development with the former uptown



Pan-tastic pies

Perfecting a classic Detroit-style pan pizza for a restaurant client inspired Peter Reinhart to author *Perfect Pan Pizza*, released last year to bring advice to home chefs on how to create these pies in their own ovens. Detroit-style pizza is baked in a square pan where the cheese flows over the edges forming a “frico,” or crispy baked cheese shell. Cooked tomato sauce is spooned on in distinct stripes after baking and before serving.

Reinhart showed off his “embedded cheese” technique for *SouthPark* magazine at Johnson & Wales University in uptown Charlotte in early August. “I take cubes of cheddar, fontina and mozzarella and push them into the dough as it is proofing (pre-rise before baking),” Reinhart explains. Before baking, the pie is topped as desired — here (opposite page) with tomatoes, pepperoni, pepperoncini and more cheese. “When the pie bakes, the embedded cheese caramelizes around the edge and along the bottom, helping form a toffee-like crust that crackles and tastes like hot buttered toast.”

Reinhart handcrafted several pies for the photo shoot, each using his master dough recipe made 24 hours in advance. JWU students Jacob Whitson and Summer Huelle assisted with the prep work and added some culinary flourishes of their own, including a hot-honey drizzle Whitson whipped up on the spot with four parts honey, one part Tabasco sauce, black pepper and hot pepper flakes to taste. Sweet, hot and sharp, the glaze was a bright complement to Reinhart’s pies.



pizzeria Pie Town, Pure Pizza and Brixx Wood Fired Pizza. Nationally, Reinhart works with organic food pioneer Amy's Kitchen on their frozen pizza line, among others.

"When my first book came out, there were maybe a couple dozen pizzerias that made the cut in terms of being memorable," Reinhart says. "Today, there are hundreds. They learn from each other and interact with the artisan bread community and share ideas, starting with the dough. Now there are people making sourdough pizzas, natural fermentation, ancient grain crusts, five-day ferments. It's almost endless."

Earlier this year Reinhart was scheduled to speak at the International Pizza Expo & Conference in Las Vegas. While the pandemic canceled the in-person event, organizers looked to Reinhart to present online in a Zoom-cast.

"The experience was a good one," said Reinhart. "It got me thinking how I could take advantage of the technology and continue live conversations with the pizza community without having to visit face to face." Pizza Talk, live dual screen Zoom interviews with his pizza pals, was born. Taking residence on his Pizza Quest website, the nearly one-hour conversations offer viewers a deeper dive into the pizza scene with back stories on products, technique and process input, and insights into the latest pizza trends and innovation.

Since May, the indefatigable Reinhart has aired more than two episodes a week, hosting the likes of Audrey Jane Kelly of Audrey Jane's Pizza Garage in Boulder, Colo., and Nicky Giusto of Central Milling, a grain and flour expert.

While there is no questioning Reinhart's passion for the "perfect flavor delivery system," it's evident in watching him interact with his peers, associates and students, there is a much greater connection he enjoys from his quest.

"Ultimately, I believe everyone is on a personal journey in search of a meaningful life," Reinhart says. "There are many levels of meaning, and this is what is behind my commitment to the craft of making bread and pizza. It opens a deeper understanding of how life works. I'm known for the saying that the mission of the baker is to evoke the full flavor of the grain. My goal as an educator is to evoke the full potential of my students. My product is now my students." **SP**