



Walking into a new pizza restaurant for the first time can feel surprisingly high stakes. The menu looks familiar at a glance, then starts to split into choices that matter more than most people expect. Thin crust or New York style. Margherita or house special. Red sauce, white sauce, no sauce at all. Add a salad, or save room for dessert. Order the obvious favorite, or test whether the kitchen can handle something simple.

If you want the best first impression of a pizza restaurant, the smartest move is not to order the wildest pie on the menu. It is to order in a way that tells you how the kitchen thinks. Good pizza places reveal themselves quickly. You can taste the quality of the dough, the restraint or excess in the sauce, the moisture control in the cheese, the confidence of the bake, and the restaurant's overall discipline. A first order should help you notice those things.

That does not mean playing it safe in a boring way. It means choosing with purpose. The goal is to leave that first meal knowing whether you want to come back, what the restaurant does well, and what you would try next.

Start with the kind of pizza that exposes the basics

At a strong pizza restaurant, the plain pies are rarely plain. They are the clearest expression of the kitchen. When you bury a pizza under six toppings, it becomes harder to tell whether the crust had any character to begin with, whether the sauce was balanced, or whether the cheese was applied with any judgment.

For a first visit, I usually steer people toward one of two choices: a margherita if the restaurant leans Neapolitan or artisan, or a classic cheese pizza if it leans New York, New Haven, tavern, or neighborhood pizzeria. Both options give you a direct read on the essentials.

A margherita sounds simple, but it is not easy to execute. The dough has to blister well. The tomato needs brightness without tasting raw or watery. Fresh mozzarella must melt without flooding the center. Basil should taste fresh, not scorched. Olive oil should support, not smother. When all of that comes together, you understand a lot about the restaurant in one bite.

A classic cheese pizza serves the same purpose in a different style. With no specialty toppings to distract you, you notice whether the crust has structure, whether the cheese blend is flavorful, whether the sauce sits in the background or dominates, and whether the slice holds up in your hand. In many American pizza restaurants, a cheese slice is still the truest test of the shop.

People often assume the “signature pizza” is the best first order. Sometimes it is. More often, it is the loudest order rather than the most revealing one. A house pie with sausage, peppers, onions, hot honey, ricotta, and chili flakes can be delicious, but it tells you less about the restaurant’s fundamentals than a simpler pizza does.

Read the menu for clues before you commit

Menus tell stories if you know what to watch for. A long list of toppings and build your own combinations usually points to a casual pizzeria built around flexibility and volume. A shorter menu with a few tightly written pies often suggests a more focused kitchen. Neither approach is automatically better, but they create different expectations.

If the menu highlights the flour, fermentation time, tomatoes, mozzarella source, or oven style, the restaurant is signaling pride in technique and ingredients. In those places, ordering simply is almost always rewarded. If the menu emphasizes combinations, specialty pies, and add ons, the restaurant may shine most when you lean into its personality.

Descriptions matter too. Words like “wood-fired,” “coal-fired,” “naturally leavened,” and “48-hour fermented” are not guarantees of quality, but they tell you what the kitchen wants you to notice. If a pizza restaurant spends half a menu describing its dough program, that dough should be part of your first decision.

Pricing can also help. If the cheese pizza is unusually expensive, ask yourself why. It may reflect premium ingredients and labor, or it may just reflect the neighborhood. If specialty pies are only a few dollars more than a plain one, the kitchen may be using toppings to drive perceived value. In that case, a simple pie remains the smarter test.

The best first order depends on the style of the restaurant

Not every pizza restaurant should be approached the same way. This is where a little judgment pays off.

At a Neapolitan spot, order the margherita or marinara first. The marinara, despite its name, usually has no cheese, just tomato, garlic, oregano, and olive oil. It is one of the sharpest tests of dough and sauce you can order. The margherita gives you a broader picture because it includes cheese management, which is often where lesser kitchens slip.

At a New York style shop, start with a cheese slice if slices are the main business, or a whole cheese pie if the restaurant bakes to order. A pepperoni slice can also work, since pepperoni is so common that every shop should know how to balance it. But if you really want to judge the pizza restaurant itself, plain cheese still gives you the cleanest answer.

At a Detroit style place, go for the classic red top or whatever house standard reflects the pan style best. Detroit pizza lives or dies by caramelized cheese edges, airy crumb, and sauce placement. Extra toppings can get heavy fast and throw the balance off.

At a tavern style or bar pizza spot, the move is a little different. Those places are often built around crispness, square cuts, and social eating. A sausage pizza, especially in the Midwest, may be more representative than a plain cheese pie because that is how regulars actually order. Context matters. The “best” first order should reflect what the restaurant is trying to be, not a universal rule.

Why one topping can be more useful than five

If you do not want a plain pie, choose one topping with intention. A single topping lets you learn something without obscuring the crust and sauce.

Pepperoni is the most useful benchmark in many pizza restaurants. It tests how the pizza handles rendered fat, how the edges crisp, and whether the kitchen understands balance. A good pepperoni pizza should not drown the slice in grease. The meat should cup or curl if that style is intended, or lie flat and crisp at the edges if not. Either way, it should taste integrated, not piled on as an afterthought.

Sausage is another revealing choice, especially if the restaurant makes it in house or sources it well. Bad sausage sits on top in gray, dense lumps. Good sausage tastes seasoned and juicy without making the crust soggy. Mushrooms can tell you whether the kitchen knows how to manage water. Fresh mushrooms often release too much moisture if applied carelessly. A pizza restaurant that gets mushrooms right is usually paying attention.

What I would avoid on a first visit are combinations that mask the fundamentals. Pineapple with ham, buffalo chicken, cheeseburger pizza, loaded supreme, and similar builds can be enjoyable, but they are harder to read. If you love those styles, save them for the second visit, once you know the kitchen can handle the base pizza.

When to order an appetizer, and when not to

A first visit does not need to become a full tasting menu. In fact, overordering is one of the easiest ways to miss what the restaurant does best. Pizza is filling, and appetizers can dull your judgment before the main event arrives.

That said, one starter can give helpful context, especially if the restaurant is known for more than pizza. A simple salad tells you something about ingredient freshness and how the kitchen handles acid and seasoning. Garlic knots or bread can reveal whether the dough remains appealing outside the pizza format. Meatballs can show whether the red sauce carries depth beyond the pie.

The key is restraint. If you order fried calamari, mozzarella sticks, wings, and a large specialty pizza, you are no longer evaluating a pizza restaurant on its pizza. You are having a party, which is a different and perfectly valid experience, just not the clearest first impression.

If you are dining with a group, one salad and one pie style you can all agree on is usually smarter than trying to cover the whole menu at once. The first visit should sharpen your sense of the place, not blur it.

A simple ordering strategy that rarely fails

If you want a practical approach, use this on your first visit:

1. Order the simplest representative pizza for that style, usually margherita, cheese, or the house classic.
2. Add only one topping if you strongly prefer it, and choose one that tests the kitchen rather than hides it.
3. Split one starter only if the restaurant has a strong reputation for it.
4. Watch the crust, sauce, cheese, and balance before deciding whether the restaurant is worth a return trip.
5. Save the signature pie, loaded specialty, or controversial topping combination for visit number two.

This approach sounds almost conservative, but it works because first impressions in a pizza restaurant are built on fundamentals. You are trying to answer a few direct questions. Does the crust have flavor? Does the pizza arrive properly baked? Is the sauce balanced? Does the cheese support the pie or smother it? Does the restaurant know when to stop adding things?

What the pizza should tell you once it hits the table

The moment the pizza arrives, a few details matter before the first bite. Aroma comes first. You should smell toasted dough, tomato, cheese, maybe basil or cured meat, depending on what you ordered. If the dominant smell is burnt flour or raw garlic, that is worth noting.

Then look at the structure. Does the crust have color? Is there a clear difference between rim and center? Does the middle sag because of excess sauce or poor baking? A certain amount of softness is normal, especially in Neapolitan pizza, but there is a difference between tender and collapsed.

The first bite should tell you whether the elements are pulling together. Good pizza has sequence. You notice crust, then sauce, then cheese, then whatever topping is present, without any single component flattening the rest. In weaker pizzas, the first bite is often just salt and grease, or acid and wet dough. Precision matters more than abundance.

I have had plenty of first visits where the restaurant’s reputation rested on spectacle, giant meatballs, dramatic ovens, imported ingredients listed in proud detail. Then the cheese pizza arrived pale or overloaded, and the whole place suddenly felt less convincing. I have also been in humble neighborhood spots with laminated menus and fluorescent lighting where a plain slice made the entire room feel trustworthy. Pizza reveals honesty fast.

How much should you customize?

Very little, at least the first time.

Custom requests can improve your meal if you know what a restaurant tends to overdo. Extra crispy, light cheese, well done, easy sauce, no basil, add ricotta, and so on all have their place. But on a first visit, too much customization makes it harder to judge what the kitchen actually intends.

If you have dietary restrictions or genuine dislikes, of course, order accordingly. No one needs to eat a pizza they will not enjoy just to prove a point. But absent those concerns, let the restaurant cook the pizza it believes in. That is the fairest test.

There is one exception. If a pizza restaurant is known for underbaking because of high volume or a very soft style, asking for a pie “a little well done” can be reasonable. I would only do that if I had reliable local advice. Otherwise, let the first pie arrive as designed.

Drinks, desserts, and the supporting cast

People underestimate how much drinks affect the first pizza experience. A crisp lager, pilsner, or sparkling water can make a great slice feel sharper and less heavy. A big sweet cocktail can make the pizza seem flatter and saltier. Red wine can work well, especially with sausage or mushroom pies, but I would avoid the most tannic bottles unless the restaurant's food leans rich and meaty.

As for dessert, I usually decide based on the dough. If the crust impressed me, I am more likely to trust a dessert that depends on similar care, perhaps zeppole, a dessert calzone, or tiramisu made in house if the restaurant leans Italian. If the pizza felt heavy or careless, dessert rarely changes the story.

The same logic applies to sides and extras. Ranch, chili oil, grated cheese, and hot honey can all be enjoyable, but use them after at least one unmodified slice. Condiments should deepen your understanding of the pizza, not rescue it.

Common first visit mistakes

Some mistakes show up again and again, and they usually come from ordering for appetite alone instead of information.

The first is chasing novelty. A pizza restaurant may offer a pie topped with burrata, pistachio cream, mortadella, lemon zest, and chili crunch. That can be excellent. It can also be camouflage. If it is your first visit, you still do not know whether the kitchen can bake a balanced base.

The second is ordering too much food too fast. Pizza arrives hot and loses its edge as it sits. A table covered in appetizers often means the main event lands after everyone is already half full.

The third is judging the restaurant by one ingredient rather than the whole pie. A person who loves very sweet sauce may dislike a more restrained one, even if it is well made. Another person may prefer heavy cheese and mistake balance for stinginess. Personal taste matters, but first visits go better when you focus on whether the pizza is coherent, not whether it matches one childhood memory exactly.

Here is a short mental checklist I use when assessing a first pie:

- Is the crust flavorful on its own?
- Does the center stay intact long enough to enjoy?
- Is the sauce bright, balanced, and proportionate?
- Does the cheese complement rather than overwhelm?
- Would I want a second slice immediately?

If the answer is yes to most of those, the pizza restaurant probably deserves another visit.

If you are dining with kids, picky eaters, or a group

Real life complicates all of this. Maybe you are not free to conduct a quiet pizza evaluation over a simple margherita. Maybe you are with children who want pepperoni only, or coworkers who need half the menu to satisfy different preferences. That is normal.

In those cases, try to preserve one reliable data point. Order one straightforward pie for the table, even if you also order a specialty pizza. That way you still get a read on the restaurant's fundamentals. With kids, a plain

cheese pizza is often the easiest shared baseline. With a larger group, split the order between one simple pie and one house signature. You get information and variety without turning the meal into chaos.

A pizza restaurant should be able to handle these situations well. Fast service, sensible pacing, and pizzas that arrive hot and consistent matter just as much as flavor when the dining room is busy and the table is mixed. Hospitality is part of the product.

The order that gives you the clearest answer

So what should you order on your first visit to a pizza restaurant?

Most of the time, the best answer is a simple pizza that fits the house style, a margherita, cheese, or classic house standard, with at most one thoughtfully chosen topping. Add a single starter only if it is genuinely part of the restaurant's reputation or if you need something to share. Keep the customizations light. Taste pizza restaurant one slice before reaching for condiments. Pay attention to the crust first, then the balance of the whole pie.

That first meal should tell you whether the restaurant understands dough, heat, restraint, and proportion. If it does, the second visit becomes the fun one. That is when you branch into the white pie, the seasonal special, the loaded signature creation, or the topping combination you really wanted all along.

A good pizza restaurant does not need to hide behind excess. On the first visit, order the pizza that makes the kitchen prove it.

Ruffrano's Hell's Kitchen Pizza Cheyenne
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FAQ About pizza restaurant

Can You Make a Vegan Pizza Without Real Cheese?

A pizza can be made without dairy cheese by using suitable dough, sauce, and vegetable toppings. Ruffrano's offers cheese-free pizzas for vegan guests. Confirm all ingredients and shared preparation practices with the restaurant before ordering.

Where can I find gluten-free pizza in Cheyenne?

For the Cheyenne Mountain Boulevard area of Colorado Springs, Ruffrano's Hell's Kitchen Pizza Cheyenne lists a 12-inch gluten-free crust. Confirm current availability when ordering. The kitchen also handles wheat, so guests with celiac disease or wheat allergies should discuss cross-contact precautions directly with staff.

Where can I find the best deep dish pizza in Cheyenne?

Preferences vary, but Ruffrano's Cheyenne Mountain Boulevard location is one option to consider in Colorado Springs. Its menu lists Deep Dish Sicilian pizza with a slow-rising crust and notes that preparation can take an hour. Confirm availability and timing with the restaurant.