

FANTASTIC FLATBREAD

By Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

It isn't quite pizza. But it sort of is. Flatbread is pizza's flamboyant cousin. There is a strong DNA connection, and they often look alike. But there is a difference, and after considerable thought and reflection I think I have determined what it is: tomato sauce.

Pizza has it. Flatbread does not. If flatbread has tomato sauce, it is pizza. If pizza does not have tomato sauce, it may still call itself pizza, but deep in its heart it knows it is really just flatbread that is putting on airs. I am speaking here of the common use of the word "flatbread." Broadly speaking, flatbread is any bread that is thin and flat, such as pita or lavash or naan. But the flatbread I am talking about is the one that looks and acts like pizza, but isn't.

The flatbread I am talking about has toppings, which means the variety you can make is endless. You could even bake a flatbread crust and smear it with peanut butter and jelly if you wanted, and now that I think about it that would taste pretty good.

I made eight flatbreads with different toppings and they were all, if I may dispense with my customary modesty, awfully good. Kind of spectacular, actually.

But before we get to the toppings, we first must discuss the crust. I tried two different recipes.

The first was thinner and crispier. The dough took just one hour to rise, but it does take a little more work to make, and it has to be kneaded for five to seven minutes.

The second was a bit thicker, chewier and heartier. It also had a more developed taste, but to achieve that taste it took two hours to rise. On the other hand, it required no kneading at all.

I recommend either one. If time is an issue, you can make and refrigerate the dough one day before you cook it; flatbread doughs also freeze particularly well.

For the toppings, I began with a couple of flatbreads for breakfast. The first one, Steak and Eggs Flatbread, is versatile enough to be enjoyed at any meal. Here, the flatbread acts more or less as toast, but with a superior flavor, on which to enjoy a hearty meal of steak and a fried egg. It's best when you pierce the yolk, which spills sensuously over the meat and crust.

A handful of cooked whole cherry tomatoes adds extra pop — not only of flavor but also the physical soft popping sensation in your mouth when you bite into them. I



Chicken, cheddar and barbecue sauce flatbread.

Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch/TNS



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch/TNS

Steak and eggs flatbread.

couldn't stop eating it, which was unfortunate because I had seven more flatbreads to go.

I used the same general idea of flatbread topped with eggs and meat for my next breakfast-oriented dish, Sausage and Eggs Flatbread. This time, the eggs are scrambled, which makes a vital difference in both flavor and texture. I cut up the sausage first and scrambled it into the eggs.

It is remarkable how easy it was to make something so deliciously distinctive.

I stayed with the general breakfast theme one last time for a dish I call Everything but the Bagel Flatbread. You

completely bake the flatbread first — which you do with most of these recipes — and then smear it with cream cheese and top it with slices of smoked salmon, a sprinkling of capers and a light scattering of thin slices of red onion.

I would never suggest that anything could be better than a bagel with lox, so I will just say that a flatbread with lox is every bit as good.

For a more substantial meal, I made a flatbread with chunks of juicy chicken, melted cheddar cheese and barbecue sauce, plus a few more slices of that red onion. Photographer Hillary Levin, who took the pictures that ac-

company this article, took one look at it and suggested I was copying a popular dish from California Pizza Kitchen.

I cannot tell a lie. I copied a popular dish from California Pizza Kitchen. But it is just so good — both theirs and mine. And mine is cheaper.

Next, I made what is probably the most unusual of the varieties I tried. Franks and Beans Flatbread, as I call it, is franks and beans on flatbread.

I was inspired, I guess, by the English dish of baked beans on toast, which is much better than it sounds. But it isn't as good as Franks and Beans Flatbread, for several reasons: Flatbread is better than toast, it has hot dogs in it and also I made homemade baked beans.

The last three flatbreads I made are all vegetarian.

Caramelized Onions and Fontina Flatbread took a minor investment of time in order to caramelize the onions. Cooking them in a bit of oil over a low heat tempers the onions' sharp notes and brings out a rich, mellow sweetness. There is nothing quite like it, but it takes about a half-hour to cook and you have to stir it frequently.

Fennel Flatbread is basically the same idea. The licorice-tasting bulb of fennel is sliced thin and mixed with olive oil and Parmesan, which here takes the place of the Fontina. The fennel is not caramelized, but roasting it on the flatbread for just a few minutes makes the flavor richer and warmer.

It also melts the Parmesan, which acts in a small way as a sharp counterpoint to the rounded tones of the fennel.

And finally I took the unbeatable pairing of figs and

Gorgonzola cheese, and applied it to the top of flatbread. There is something about figs that bring out the best in Gorgonzola (it's a blue cheese), and vice versa, but it is all even better when topped with a drizzle of sweet honey.

CHICKEN, CHEDDAR AND BARBECUE SAUCE FLATBREAD

Yield: 1 serving

- 1 portion flatbread
- 1 cup cooked chicken, cut into small cubes or shredded
- 3/4 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 2 tablespoons barbecue sauce
- 1 or 2 thin slices red onion

1. Preheat oven to 500 degrees and place pizza stone or a baking sheet in the lower third of the oven.
2. Roll out flatbread dough until thin. Place on parchment paper on top of upside-down baking sheet, prick several times with a fork and slide parchment onto the hot pizza stone or baking sheet. Bake until golden brown, 9 to 10 minutes. If dough puffs up while cooking, deflate by pricking more times with a fork.
3. Sprinkle with cheddar cheese and top with pieces of chicken. Drizzle with barbecue sauce and scatter pieces of red onion on top. Return to oven and cook until the cheese melts, about 2 minutes.

— Recipe by Daniel Neman

CARAMELIZED ONIONS AND FONTINA FLATBREAD

Yield: 2 servings

- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 large onion, sliced thin
- Salt, to taste
- 2 portions flatbread crust
- 5 ounces Fontina cheese, shredded or sliced thin

1. Heat oil in medium pan over medium heat until hot. Add onions, reduce heat to low and cook slowly, stirring frequently, until they become sweet and caramelized and turn the color of coffee with a lot of cream, about 30 minutes. Salt to taste. Onions may be made a day or two ahead and refrigerated.
2. Preheat oven to 500 degrees and place pizza stone or a baking sheet in the lower and upper thirds of the oven.
3. Roll out flatbread dough until thin. Place on two pieces of parchment paper on top of upside-down baking sheets, prick several times with a fork and slide parchment onto the hot pizza stones or baking sheets.
4. Bake until dough turns a light golden brown, 9 to 10 minutes. Remove from oven. Top with cheese and then caramelized onions. Return to oven and cook until cheese melts, about 2 minutes.

— Recipe by Daniel Neman

EVERYTHING BUT THE BAGEL FLATBREAD

Yield: 1 serving

- 1 portion flatbread dough
- 1 tablespoon cream cheese
- 1 1/2 ounces smoked salmon
- 1/2 teaspoon capers
- 1 or 2 thin slices red onion
- 1 teaspoon everything-bagel mix (sesame seeds, poppy seeds, onion flakes), optional

1. Preheat oven to 500 degrees and place pizza stone or a baking sheet in the lower third of the oven.
2. Roll out flatbread dough until thin. Place on parchment paper on top of upside-down baking sheet, prick several times with a fork and slide parchment onto the hot pizza stone or baking sheet. Bake until golden brown, 9 to 10 minutes. If dough puffs up while cooking, deflate by pricking more times with a fork.
3. Allow flatbread to cool for a couple of minutes, then spread with cream cheese and cover with smoked salmon. Sprinkle capers on top, and scatter with thin pieces of red onion. Finish with everything-bagel mix, if desired.

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Happy that early October brought rain rather than snow

Last year it snowed on the 9th of October. I'm glad to see it rain instead. Not that snow is bad — any precipitation is better than none.

It's the quality I question. It takes 10 inches of snow to equal 1 inch of rain. Now you see what I mean. Rain seems to have a better quality and is warmer as well! What we need now that it's raining: It should persist until we have duration of rain and soaking to set our landscape up for a better



BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

winter. Parched plants are prone to winterkill.

It is time to admire the autumn colors. The color is more saturated (intense) and becomes a more beautiful photo on an overcast or rainy day. It's good to think positive. A better

photo is a plus.

Garden Chores

- Pinch off any tomatoes that are too small to ripen. This will channel energy into ripening the remaining full-size fruits.
- Newly seeded lawns should not be cut until they are at least 2 or 3 inches tall.
- Autumn is a good time to add manure, compost or leaf mold to garden soils to increase organic matter content.

- Plant spring bulbs among hostas, ferns, and daylilies or groundcovers. As these plants grow in the spring they will cover dying bulb foliage.
- Container grown and B&B (balled and burlapped) trees and shrubs can be planted. Loosen soil in an area five times the diameter of the root ball before planting. Mulch well after watering.
- For best bloom later this winter, Christmas cactus, potted azaleas, and kalanchoe may be left outdoors

- until night temperatures drop to about 40 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Transplant deciduous trees once they have dropped their leaves.
 - Plant tulips now.
 - Trees may be fertilized now. This is best done after soil test guidelines.
 - Store apples in a cool basement in perforated bags for good air circulation.
- If you have garden questions or comments, please write to green-gardencolumn@yahoo.com. Happy gardening!