

The Mystery of Miami's Cuban Pizza, Revealed

by [Ana Heretoiu](#) | Mar 21, 2014, 12:47pm EDT



All Photos Courtesy of Ashley Brozic

New York has its own style, Chicago's got the deep dish, and Miami? Well, we too have a pizza that's native to our land. We all know very well that almost everything that originates here has hispanic roots, and pizza pies are no exception. Without further ado, we present to you **the Cuban pizza**.

You're thinking, What on earth is a Cuban pizza? Don't Google it. You'll just get a surge of restaurant links and makeshift recipes that try to claim a pizza as Cuban by sprinkling black beans on top. This, friends, does not constitute a Cuban pizza. There's nigh an article that clearly describes what it is in clear terms. In order to solve our profound confusion, and the new bewilderment that's pestering you, we went straight to the holy grail of the Cuban pie, **Rey's Pizza**, to speak with **Ramon Rodriguez** who, in this city, continues to be the king of the Cuban pizza, [as his jingle says](#).

The man was destined for greatness. At 19 he was running five restaurants in Cuba and at some point along the line, learned how to make pizza from an Argentinian man before

fleeing to America in the 80s. Itching to pave his own American dream, he got himself a partner and bought out an ice cream store on the corner of **24th and Flagler street**, where his monstrous pizza castle now stands. A heated pizza war with an ex partner, a brief cameo in **Chuck Norris'** Invasion U.S.A. and nine locations across Miami later, it's safe to say that Rodriguez knows his stuff when it comes to running a pizza empire, all without speaking a word of english.



While the dish frequents our city more than in any other, it didn't actually originate here. Rodriguez believes that, like the rest of the world, the Italians introduced the dish to the Cubans, who added their own spin. What spin is this exactly? Here's your answer.

If we leave out the toppings, a Cuban pizza is not much different than a traditional American-Italian one. At the end of the day, it's dough, it's sauce and it's cheese. Where a Cuban pizza differs, then, is in the **details** of its ingredients. For starters, the **dough** is more plump, which is usually what any Cuban pizza aficionado will tell you. In Rodriguez's case, it's because he leaves it out longer than usual to let it rise more. Next, he adds his secret ingredient: a specially-made **sauce** which, today, is specifically imported from California to meet the high demands of his chain. We asked him if he'd let us in on the ingredients. He respectfully declined.

Now here's where we really start to see the difference. A Cuban pizza uses not one, but two different types of cheese: **mozzarella** and **Gouda**. At Rey's Pizza, they pride themselves on using the best. While most average Joe pizza joints use mozzarella cheese made of part-skim milk, the mozzarella used at Rey's is made with **whole milk**. Their branded mozzarella is the reason why their pies have a greasy shine to them.

You may be wondering how **Gouda**, an import from Holland, got thrown into the mix. In Cuba, before the whole rationing system was put into place, it was a very commonly used cheese in multiple items, including the famed Cuban sandwich. At some point in history it got thrown onto pizza, thus differentiating the dish enough to claim a different title. The Gouda that Rey's uses comes in a round, head sized block that's directly imported from Holland.

The final component that differentiates a Cuban pizza is the way it's made. The toppings aren't sprinkled above the pie as they traditionally are; they're baked into it. Thus, you'll never suffer from drop bombed pepperoni or spilt sausage because there's a thick layer of cheese above that tightly holds it all together. The toppings used at Rey's are ones you are familiar with; think ham, chorizo, pepperoni, pineapple, onions and mushrooms, although he does throw in some Cuban curveballs like *picadillo* (ground beef), bananas and shrimp. At other local restaurants that serve the dish, like **Polo Norte**, you can find toppings like *platanos maduros* (fried green plantains) and lobster.

All of these elements- thick dough, a double overload of cheese, toppings baked into the pie- come together to make up what we know today as the Cuban pizza. While we can't credit Rodriguez for bringing this style of pie to the states, we can confidently credit him for perfecting it. "Anybody can say they make a Cuban pizza," says Raymond Jr., his son, "but in our case it's the ingredients we use. We're a step above everyone else in that we use top quality products." Imported Gouda from Holland, branded sauce and mozzarella, toppings made, not in-house, but by people who specialize in making them? We would say so.

In fact, the demand for his pizza was so high at one point that Ramon was forced to keep his location open for 24 hours, he says, in fear that hungry customers who came by after closing, often in limousines, would break in and steal from his small but thriving Flagler locale. It's this entrepreneurial spirit, this obsession to differentiate something so simple, so basic as a pizza by enhancing the quality of the ingredients, that Rodriguez has been able to help give America another version of pizza to call its own, even though no one outside of Dade County knows it.

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--Ashley Brozic