De-ethnicization in America

Pizza according to *The Better Homes and Gardens Encyclopedia of Cooking* is

The Italian word for pie, now specifically applied to a spicy, open-faced pie traditionally topped with tomatoes, cheese, and herbs. The flavorful topping usually contains other ingredients such as onion, green pepper, mushrooms, sausage, ground beef, or anchovies.\(^1\)

This Italian dish has become very popular in the United States since it was introduced in the nineteenth century\(^2\). The first pizzeria opened in 1905, but pizza didn’t become popular until after World War II when in the 1950’s pizza chains such as Pizza Hut began popularizing pizza.\(^3\) In the town of Northfield, MN there are at least five different pizzerias for a population of 19,859\(^4\) people. The cafeterias of Carleton College always have pizza to serve to the students. What made pizza so widely accepted? How did it evolve to be arguably one of the most popular foods in America today? How does pizza affect the United States society and food practices? The answer for some is simple, “Pizza is tasty. Pizza is filling. Pizza is cheap. Pizza is fast. Pizza is therefore American.”\(^5\) I disagree. **American** pizza is cheap. **American** pizza is fast, pizza is not American originally, but is becoming Americanized.

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\(^1\) Barbara Hunt Lazerson, "Is Pizza a Pie?," *American Speech* 55, no. 2 (1980).
\(^2\) “Pizza History,” http://library.thinkquest.org/5172/pizza.html
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) “The city of Northfield,” http://www.ci.northfield.mn.us/aboutnorthfield
\(^5\) Jay Staller, "As American as Pizza Pie," *Smithsonian* 28, no. 3.
The history and evolution of pizza goes all the way back to the eighteenth century. Originally eaten by the Greeks, flat bread caught on quickly in Italy and this flat bread acquired the name pizza\(^6\). In 1889 the queen of Italy had a special pizza made for her that was made with tomatoes, mozzarella, and Basil. This is the first type of pizza that resembles what we consider pizza today. This style of pizza spread across Italy and variations were soon created. These variations included different meats, vegetables, and spices. Pizza eventually made its way over to America in 1905 when the first pizzeria opened in New York\(^7\). Initially the pizzeria attracted Italian immigrants when it first opened\(^8\). Pizza really began to gain popularity after the Second World War.

In the 1940s Chicago’s Pizzeria Uno came up with deep-dish, or Chicago-style, pizza. The Pizza Hut chain was founded in 1958 by two brothers while they were still students at Wichita State University. In the 1960s two more brothers, this time in Medford, Wisconsin, came up with the Tombstone brand. Domino’s, with its promise of delivery within 30 minutes, became a major player in the 1980s.\(^9\)

Looking at an ethnic Pizza menu\(^10\) of a restaurant called “Classic Italian Pizza” in Arizona. You can see a quality level difference between what is used in their pizzas and what is used in pizzeria chains such as Dominos. “Classic Italian Pizza” has pizzas such as the Margherita pizza which is the pizza that was originally served to the queen of Italy. It included tomatoes, basil, and fresh mozzarella cheese which made the colors of the Italian flag.

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\(^6\) http://www.innamaskitchen.com/FOOD_IS_ART/pizzahistory.html
\(^7\) http://www.firstpizza.com/history.html
\(^8\) Ibid
\(^9\) Jay Stuller, ”As American as Apple Pizza Pie,” *Smithsonian* 1997.
\(^10\) http://www.allmenus.com/az/phoenix/283372-classic-italian-pizza/menu/
Jeffrey Pilcher uses ethnic Mexican food as an example in his book chapter: *Eating Mexican in a Global Age: The Politics and Production of Ethnic Food.* This chapter discusses the globalization of the Mexican cuisine and the affects that this globalization has on ethnic Mexican food. He stated that the ethnic cuisine evolved from the community members interacting with one another. Using his article about ethnic Mexican food and how it changed when combined with other countries we can compare that to the Italian pizza.

Original Mexican ethnic food was more vegetarian using a balance of “maize, beans, squash, combined with chiles and other produce and game.” This was interrupted by the Spaniards who introduced their own cuisine to the Mexicans; the main addition was that of more meat. When the country of America was formed Mexican Americans began cooking with large amounts of whatever was available in the United States. The “U” shaped taco was an American adaption that was unheard of in Mexico; much like that of the deep dish Chicago style of pizza that varies from the thin crust Italian pizza. Fast food chains also poorly affected ethnic Mexican food, much like that of the many pizza chains that we have in America. “The industrial process distanced food both from the source of production and from its origins in the ethnic community.”11 Another statement that Pilcher makes was that, “Mexican food has continued to undergo a process of localization to fit with the cultural expectations of the consumers.”12 American pizza has undergone such a

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12 Ibid.
process of localization; Americans have less time to eat as proved by Stanley Mintz, thus it is made quickly and is unable to keep the Italian standards.

Ethnic Italian pizza is different from American pizza. “A delegation from Naples toured the United States trying to sort out what is real pizza and what is not.” This “True Neapolitan Pizza Association” said the dough must be punched by hand, have a brick oven heated by wood, and that the pizza itself needs a well-done crust with a high, soft edge. Crust is the most important part of the pizza in Naples, Italy. Nearly all American pizza fails to fulfill these Neapolitan guidelines.

In Italy the “True Neapolitan Pizza Association” pushed for “governmentally recognized trademark for Neapolitan pizza”. Other pizzerias rejected the guidelines that were proposed by this association, but they have their own set of rules and regulations for their style of pizza, which clashes with other forms of Italian pizza. American Pizza on the other hand is all about making money, and getting customers by producing the most and fastest pizzas. Instead of different pizza chains arguing about the quality of their pizza, like in Italy, they fight price wars and deals to try to lure in more customers, rather than debate about the pizza quality itself.

In Stanley Mintz’s Eating American he states, “I do not see how a cuisine can exist unless there is a community of people who eat it, cook it, have opinions about it, and engage in dialogue involving those opinions.”

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13 Staller, "As American as Pizza Pie."
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
America we have most but not all of these requirements to have an ethnic cuisine. We eat, cook, and have opinions about our pizza but when it comes to discussing pizza the discussion usually is about getting more customers and how to make more money. This is compared to the Italians who eat, cook, and have opinions about pizza, but they also argue about the qualities of their pizzas and try to make governmental standards for the entire country about their pizza.

America is a nation built on speed and time availability, this is a problem for many ethnic foods. Ethnic Italian pizza is a time consuming food to make, much like that of the ethnic Mexican foods that were described in Pilcher’s article. Pilcher believes that “kitchen labor rather than ingredients define the limits of ethnic cuisine in a global era.” This makes the best authentic-ethnic foods made at home where money and time are less of a factor that plays into the relevance of the food item.

Rather than pizza affecting the United States society and food practices I believe that the real question should be flipped around. How do the United States society and food practices affect pizza and any other ethnic food? The answer is very clear: America’s fast pace lifestyle has changed not only pizza, but other ethnic foods into a meal that can be ready in just minutes with minimum labor put into it. The labor and time that are involved with the making of these foods are a big portion of the ethnicity that comes with them. Remove them and the food will slowly but surely become de-ethnicized.

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18 Pilcher, "Eating Mexican in a Global Age: The Politics and Production of Ethnic Food."
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