

Q&A: Brad Kent on Olio's Perfect Crust, Blaze, More

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Brad Kent, chef and owner of [Olio Pizzeria](#) on West Third Street, isn't your average pizzaiolo. Before he opened the restaurant, the Culinary Institute of America graduate went on to get a degree in food science and nutrition, worked for the Department of Defense, and helped create some of your favorite snack foods for Trader Joe's. Now he's a partner and the chef consultant for [Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza](#), the burgeoning quick-serve chain that just opened its third location around Los Angeles, and working on a [second Olio inside the new-old Grand Central Market downtown](#). The key to great pizza is really the sum of its parts, he says, from the crust (Olio's is fantastic and so under-rated) to the oven, wood and proportion of toppings.

"Pizza is a sensory meltdown," says Kent. "It's sweet, sour, salty. The tomato in the sauce gives you umami. The crust gives you texture and that fermentation taste, which sometimes hits sour. And then all that texture and flavor from the toppings and cheese. Getting all of that in one bite is why pizza is the perfect food." Read on for more from Kent on making the perfect pizza for Olio and Blaze, expansion and why love is just as important to great pizza as the toppings.

Zagat: How did you get into the pizza game?

Brad Kent: I started cooking as a child, growing produce in my backyard. First thing I made was fried zucchini and hollandaise, and I've been cooking ever since. I started a catering business with food and wine pairing while in college, and then went on to get a degree at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, and a degree in food science and nutrition in Long Beach. I've worked in fine dining, at [Aureole](#) in New York City and [Patina](#) here, and learned what great restaurants are all about. It's about simplicity: olive oil, salt, pepper, quality

ingredients. And then I settled on a Mediterranean style of cooking. For 25 years I was a catering chef, and you have to prepare things fast and good, and pizza has everything that my background has: simple, tastes good, done fast.

Zagat: And we read that you worked for the Department of Defense at one point? What did you do?

BK: I helped create natural food for the field, formulating recipes that would have longer shelf life and not using any preservatives.

Zagat: What's the secret to being a great pizza chef?

BK: The pizza line is all about being well prepped. You stand in one place, you make it, throw it in the oven and you get results immediately. You're controlling the flame, the fermentation of the dough, the portions of the sauces and toppings, and all of that is critical in how the pizza tastes. Thinking of that consciously when you're assembling is something is exciting to me, and doing it over and over and over is that challenge. Getting a perfect pizza is not something you can do time after time. I don't care who you are; it never comes out perfect every time.

Zagat: So pizza is a science.

BK: Yes, but with science you have to be creative. You can't solve problems by going to the book all the time. Sometimes you have to figure it out. Using my creative side and my scientific side together I was able to develop the dough I have, which is reproducible. That's something I learned from my food manufacturing.

Zagat: Olio's crust is so unique and perfect. It doesn't flop, yet it's soft. And crispy underneath. How?

BK: It has that soft pillowy texture of Neapolitan pizza and that crunch of a thin crust NY-style pizza. [Part of it is] the methods we use for shaping the dough. I know that the oven temperature is what gives it some of its spring, texture and crunchiness. I wanted it to have some char, which means you have to cook it fast, which is why you don't get that with just NY-style pizza. We try to keep the temperature at 840 degrees on the floor of the oven. That's just my oven. We use four different flours, one is whole grain which I did for nutritional value. But it's not just the flours that make it special, it's the ratio of each of those ingredients. I'm such a tinkerer with recipes, and I thought I'd change things, but I'm really happy with it. It's the style that I like.

Zagat: Great pizza starts with great dough.

BK: It's all about how the dough is handled, if it's handled with care and love, it will go down easier. You get something that had qualities of really good French bread. When I was developing recipes, I had texture but I wanted to know how to get flavor and beautiful air bubbles. I consider the French to be the best bread bakers in the world. We use some French techniques in mixing. We blend the flours together, which emulates French flour more than Italian. That's where we get the flavor, the fermentation...and a lot of that love. I make pizza in an Italian style but French. It's crust and chew.

Zagat: What about the ratio of sauce and toppings?

BK: It's critical! I can make you a lousy pizza with the perfect oven and the perfect dough, but with just an extra ounce of sauce or cheese, it won't be good. You might say it's good, but I won't trust your opinion. There are physics laws that happen when you cook a pizza in an oven, to know which ingredients are going to flow in which direction. But if you don't know that, your pizza won't come out right.

Zagat: It's also the oven, we imagine. What kind of wood do you use in the oven?

BK: I've probably worked with 100 different ovens, and each has its own characteristic. The size, everything it's made out of, the air flow. All this stuff plays a critical role in great pizza. The size of the coal; I researched the type of wood to use. For instance, at Olio on Third, we only use olive wood. It's the best wood for that oven. At Olio downtown, we might change that, it depends on the oven. Almond is usually seasoned better. You use almond wood to get a spike in heat, and olive makes better coals and makes less ash.

Zagat: And how does what you created for Blaze differ from Olio?

BK: Olio is truly artisanal. I don't want to take the hands off of it. Maybe the pizzaiolo has to react to how the oven is that day, maybe it's too cool or the wood's too wet. That's hard to do at Blaze. You can't have consistency if you don't have measuring in place. If you do a heaping spoon here or there at Blaze, it will be a different pizza.

Zagat: Plus it's a chain. You probably don't have the same caliber of cooks.

BK: No, I have career people at Olio. At Blaze we get people that this is their first job, or the first time they've handled food. To make that transition, we had to make something very foolproof. Or human-proof. If we're making a lot of pizzas, and we make our dough a day ahead, we had to make a dough that's easy to produce. So I went back to my roots in manufacturing and formulated a mix. It's in two parts so no one knows what's in it. It's packaged and the mixes get mixed together. There's a special mixing process, and a long fermentation process. We have specialized equipment that has timers so you won't over-mix it. We adjust the temperature daily for the temperature of the flour, the bowl, the room, but the water temperature will be the same at every store. We use machines to press the dough to our specifications, to get a gentle press each time. It does not allow you to mishandle your dough. It's not as light and airy as hand-stretched, but it's not going to get overstretched like a lot of New York pizza chefs do.

Zagat: Whoa. That sounds like a slam. What do you mean?

BK: Well, New York is a very intense pizza culture. If you watch a New York chef stretch his dough, it's a relatively assertive way to stretch. But if you watch someone in Italy, it's handled much more gentle and gingerly. The press at Blaze is more gentle than many people would be.

Zagat: And the dough is all natural?

BK: Completely. Just extra virgin olive oil, water, flour and our secret ingredients. But there's nothing in there that you wouldn't see at Olio. It's clean, clean, clean.

Zagat: We've seen lines snake around the corner at the Pasadena Blaze. We've tried it; not bad. Why do you think it's so successful?

BK: I don't know. It's not even a great location! There's not really any parking. But I think it's the value of it. People are smarter these days. More people are in the kitchen or watching TV to hear chefs talk about food, and it's simplicity and quality. And that fact that they can see it all made in front of them. There's nothing to hide. And the fact that it's \$7.45 for as many toppings as you want.

Zagat: And now Blaze is on a fast-track for growth.

BK: We have one company store, in Pasadena, and the others are all franchised, although we're entertaining the idea of adding more company stores. Right now we have over 170 commitments nationwide. And next month we're opening our first out-of-state location, in Michigan. And we'll have some in the Midwest and perhaps some on the East Coast next year. Here, the La Canada location will open in about two weeks.

Zagat: Are you surprised at how some pizza places are so popular and their pizza isn't any good?

BK: It goes back to the sensory attributes of pizza. If pizza's just wrong, it's bad. My wife still orders Domino's. Yes, I'll go home after working all day with pizza and find Domino's. But that's one I can't eat. They put that buttered popcorn flavor around the crust and it's horrible. The texture of the dough is really bad. And the sauce is thick and heavy. And the cheese doesn't stretch. There's not one ounce of love in that. Maybe it's good to some people; you're still getting what humans like. Sweet, salt, tart, umami. But it sits in your stomach as a lump. Even at Blaze where we're making 1,000 pizzas a day, we can still deliver a crust that doesn't sit in your stomach.

Zagat: Olio is, to us, an under-the-radar spot. It's so good though. Anything new there?

BK: We opened in 2010 and it's still going. We have a spicy pizza now. I did so much research before we opened, people won't even eat at a pizza restaurant if the owner isn't there or they don't make their own sauces. We make our own sauces and meatballs. Now we have a spicy pork sausage, which we added because there's a demand for it. I tried chicken sausage instead - I'm so Californian, I can't help it - but this is what they want.

Zagat: What can we expect from the new location at Grand Central Market downtown?

BK: In Naples pizza is like Starbucks in New York City, literally on every corner. I want to be that for Downtown. A place you go in a hurry, a pizza made in three minutes. Why wouldn't you eat pizza? You want to be able to have a drink and a pizza for \$10. So we'll have a smaller pizza. We have to make ourselves an option for those who don't want to spend \$12-15 for lunch. Just make pizzas to order really well, and make sure it's an alternative to a fast food restaurant.

Zagat: You have breakfast items at Third Street. Will you do the same here?

BK: Yes, we have breakfast items at Olio on weekends, that blueberry Danish, so we'll have to do a Danish down there too. I want to do more items, hopefully to do some sort of

egg pizza. Something with crab and lemon. We have different menus today at Olio than when we opened. I may need to change things to fit the demographics of the neighborhood.

Zagat: When will it open?

BK: The oven is in Northern California now. It's a Stefano Ferrara oven made in Naples. I work 14 hour days with Blaze and finding time to devote to the opening. I'll need at least two weeks to condition the oven when it's ready. Ideally I'd love to be open before Christmas, so we'll see.