

Top 50 Pizza Places In Greater Hartford

By SPENCER CALDWELL

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Perhaps Hartford can't compete head to head with New Haven for pizza — even New York and Chicago can't — but our metropolitan area is still one of the nation's strongest for pizza. It's applause, not apology, that is due.

I tried more than 60 pizzerias in Greater Hartford for this survey. The results are wholly my opinion and in no way reflect management's position (insert legalese). They're meant to generate discussion and give serious pizza lovers a checklist of pizzas to consider.

I certainly bring my own set of biases to the list. I grew up in Hamden, paying frequent visits to nearby Bimonte's Pizza Palace and occasional visits to Sally's or Pepe's, so I prefer my pizza pies thin-crust, scorched and oily. That doesn't mean, however, that I don't enjoy other styles, too.

In Greater Hartford, it seemed that New York-style pizzas are the most common, Greek-style second, New Haven-style third and Neapolitan-style fourth. They're not always clearly distinguishable. I'm admittedly less partial to Greek- than Italian-style pizzas, however, which is why so many Greek entries, fairly or not, remain mired in my honorable mention category.

It's the nature of restaurateurs that only the first-place winner will be pleased, but any pizzeria mentioned should be flattered, because I didn't include any that I wouldn't be happy to keep chowing down on with a salad and a couple of beers until I was full. That was my minimum standard for inclusion. Note that I'm not vouching equally for every location of a pizza group, just the one I tried, which is listed first.

Although it would have been more fun to try each pizzeria's specialty, I wanted to compare apples with apples. My approach was to look at the style, technique and quality of ingredients of a basic pizza. That meant, whenever possible, I ordered either a cheese pie or a margherita (and sometimes a cheese pie was a margherita). If a pizzeria depended for its popularity primarily on its toppings, then it wasn't likely to score highly under my approach. Along with my friend Bob and my vegetarian daughter, we sampled and enjoyed until we chose Greater Hartford's 50 best pizzas:

1. Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana, Manchester, 860-644-7333, pepespizzeria.com (more than three locations)

The best reason to avoid going to New Haven for pizza is the fact that the granddaddy of New Haven-style pizza has come to you. We tested the Pepe's in Manchester, and I'm sorry, fans of New York-style or Greek-style or Neapolitan-style or any-other-style pizza, but the pies were magical. Simply orgasmic. Its pizzas might not win any beauty contests, but they should win any local blind taste-testing. They may look a little scruffy, with scorching, blisters and oven schmutz on the cornicione and undercarriage, but that crust is wonderfully crunchy, tasty and light.

And, oh my God, what flavor. The Holy Trinity of cheese, sauce and olive oil on our cheese pie was so heavenly I think we heard a choir of angels when we bit into it, and our clam pie with bacon was an amazing amalgam of flavor, moisture and texture. Could these pizzas pass the droop test? Of course not, but I have never believed in that test. If you're going to load up a thin crust pie with clam or other fine ingredients and slather on the olive oil, it's going to droop. It's supposed to droop. That's why God gave you two hands (and probably why New Haven-area pizzerias sometimes cut their pies into random trapezia, not elongated triangles). And Pepe's is why God gave you taste buds. Try: Fresh tomato pie, July through September.

2. OTTO Pizza, 69 Main St., Chester, 860-526-9445, ottochester.com

Running a shockingly close second was OTTO Pizza Chester, which we almost missed due to its relative newness and geographic isolation. That would have been a great pity, because OTTO produces the best pizza we've ever had that wasn't born on Wooster Street. Open just a few months and owned by Jonathan Rapp of nearby River Tavern, OTTO fires its 14-inch pies in an EarthStone oven fed with oak and a little birch. The dough rests in the fridge two days. Ingredients are farm to table, and the menu changes daily. The results? We resisted all the tempting artisan combinations to try a gloriously light, thin-crust cheese pizza that would not pass the droop test and exhibited a rolled cornicione, bubbles and blisters, and a scorched bottom. The balance of cheese (from Liuzzi in North Haven), sauce (whole peeled Alta Cucina plum tomatoes) and olive oil (Spanish) was sheer perfection. Try: white with porchetta, duck cream sauce smoked Mozzarella and asparagus.

3. Harry's Bishops Corner, West Hartford, 860-236-0400, harrysbc.com

I'm a huge Harry's Bishops Corner fan. If we lived in an alternate universe where New Haven never existed, it would undoubtedly be my favorite pizzeria. A cheese pie there is a thing of beauty, with a modest cornichione with nice blistering and a crust with a hint of scorching and oven schmutz.

Topside, it benefits from that perfect ratio of cheese, sauce and olive oil that I like to call the Holy Trinity. It even passes the droop test (not that it should have to). We also ordered a clam casino, but we would have been better off just adding bacon to a simple clam pie, because Harry's puts roasted red peppers on its clam casino that, while delicious in their own right, mask the clam and bacon flavors. Nevertheless, God bless Harry's Bishops Corner. Try: Shrimp Florentine.