



Walking into a new pizza restaurant for the first time can feel oddly high stakes. Pizza looks simple, but anyone who eats it often knows that no two places do it the same way. One shop leans hard into blistered Neapolitan pies with a soupy center and soft **pizza restaurant** rim. Another turns out crisp, tavern-style pizzas cut into squares. A third treats pizza like a luxury dish, layering fennel sausage, Calabrian chiles, and imported cheeses on top of a long-fermented crust. If you order blindly, you might leave thinking the place is overrated when, in truth, you simply chose the wrong pie for that kitchen.

The smartest first order is not always the most exciting one. It is the order that tells you who the restaurant is, what it does well, and whether you want to come back. That takes a bit of judgment. You want enough range to understand the kitchen, but not so much food that everything blurs together. You also want to avoid the common first-visit mistake: loading up on heavy toppings that hide the crust, sauce, and cheese balance, which are the foundation of every good pizza.

If you approach the menu with a little strategy, your first meal at a pizza restaurant can tell you nearly everything you need to know.

Start by reading the room, not just the menu

Before you decide what to order, look around. The dining room usually reveals what kind of place you are in long before the first slice lands on the table. Watch the size of the pizzas. Notice whether most tables share one large pie or if each person has their own. Pay attention to crusts. Are they thin and cracker-like, puffy and leopard-spotted, or thick and pan-baked with browned cheese edges?

This matters because the ideal order at one pizza restaurant can be a poor choice at another. A margherita at a wood-fired Neapolitan spot is almost always the right starting point because it shows the dough, the tomato quality, and the restraint of the kitchen. The same order at a bar-style neighborhood pizzeria might feel underwhelming, because that style often shines with a little more salt, a little more topping coverage, and a crisper bake.

The menu language helps too. If you see terms like “DOP San Marzano,” “fior di latte,” and “90-second bake,” expect delicacy and a softer center. If the menu offers extra cheese, double pepperoni, and ranch without apology, the restaurant is probably aiming for comfort and bold flavor rather than minimalism. Neither approach is inherently better. You just want your order to match the restaurant’s strengths.

If you are dining with company, this gets easier. You can order two pies and compare. If you are alone, you need to be more deliberate. In that case, one pizza and one smaller side can still give you a clear read on the kitchen.

The safest great first order for most places

If I had to give one default answer for a first visit, it would be this: order one classic pizza that the kitchen cannot hide behind toppings, then add one item that shows range. In practice, that often means a margherita, a plain cheese, or a pepperoni, depending on the style of the restaurant.

A plain cheese pizza is deeply underrated as a first order. It exposes everything. You taste the dough fermentation, the salt level in the sauce, the moisture management, the quality of the mozzarella, and whether the bake is disciplined or sloppy. Good pizza shops know this. Many cooks will tell you, quietly and with a little pride, that their cheese pie is the real test.

Pepperoni is just as useful, especially in American-style pizzerias. It shows whether the shop understands balance. Great pepperoni should cup or crisp if that is the style, release some fat without turning the pie greasy, and bring spice without overwhelming the sauce. A bad pepperoni pizza often fails in obvious ways. The topping slides off. The oil pools in the center. The crust turns limp under the weight. You learn a lot very quickly.

Margherita is more specific. It is perfect at restaurants focused on simpler Italian styles, but it can mislead you elsewhere. A margherita made with fresh mozzarella naturally throws more moisture than a low-moisture cheese pie. If the restaurant is not set up to manage that, the center may be wet. At a place built for that style, though, margherita tells you almost everything that matters.

How to choose the right “test pizza”

The best first order depends on what kind of pizza restaurant you are visiting. People often miss this and order according to their personal cravings rather than the strengths of the house. That is understandable, but if your goal is to judge the place fairly, style should lead the decision.

At a Neapolitan or wood-fired restaurant, start with margherita or marinara. Marinara, despite the name, usually has no cheese, just tomato, garlic, oregano, and olive oil. It is one of the purest ways to test dough and sauce. If that sounds too austere for a first date or family dinner, margherita is the more crowd-pleasing move.

At a New York-style slice shop or full-service pizzeria, plain cheese or pepperoni is usually the right call. These places live and die by their ability to produce a foldable slice with a crisp underside, balanced sauce, and cheese that stretches without sliding. Fancy toppings can wait.

At a tavern-style or thin-crust Midwestern spot, sausage is often a smart first order, especially if the house makes it in-house or seasons it distinctively. In many of those restaurants, sausage is not an afterthought. It is part of the identity of the pie.

At a Detroit-style place, go for something close to their standard build. Detroit pizza relies on pan caramelization, edge cheese, and sauce placement. The restaurant usually has a signature pie that demonstrates that formula better than a custom order ever will.

That last point is worth emphasizing. If the menu has a house special that clearly anchors the restaurant's reputation, pay attention. Sometimes the best first order is not the simplest one, because the kitchen has engineered one pie to represent itself. You can tell the difference between a gimmicky specialty pizza and a true signature. The latter tends to show up on tables repeatedly, survive menu changes, and get recommended by servers without hesitation.

Why one simple pie beats a build-your-own on the first visit

Build-your-own pizza sounds appealing because it promises control. On a first visit, though, it often tells you less than you think. Too many toppings create moisture problems, salt overload, and muddled flavor. More importantly, the custom pie says more about your preferences than the kitchen's skill.

Restaurants design certain topping combinations for a reason. They know how their dough bakes, how their sauce behaves, and which toppings release water or fat. They also know how much the crust can carry before it loses structure. If you pile mushrooms, onions, olives, extra cheese, sausage, and peppers onto a thin crust, the result may disappoint, but the restaurant may not be the real problem.

There is also the issue of timing. Some pizzas are meant to bake hard and fast, while others need a little more time for thicker toppings to cook **best pizza restaurant** through. Specialty combinations are usually calibrated around that. Customizing too aggressively can throw off the bake.

For a first visit, restraint pays off. Order the version the kitchen believes in. Once you know how they execute the basics, then start improvising on the second or third visit.

A side dish can tell you more than you expect

At a pizza restaurant, the side order is not filler. It often reveals how disciplined the kitchen is beyond the oven. A strong appetizer or salad suggests the place takes its ingredients seriously and is not relying entirely on pizza to do the work.

If I want a broader sense of a restaurant on a first visit, I usually add one of the following:

- a simple salad, if I want to judge produce quality and dressing balance
- meatballs, if the restaurant leans Italian American
- garlic knots or bread, if the dough is central to the concept

- roasted vegetables, if the menu suggests a more seasonal kitchen
- a dessert like tiramisu or soft serve, if I am curious whether the restaurant finishes as strongly as it starts

A salad may sound unglamorous, but it can be revealing. A fresh, sharply dressed salad with real texture tells you the kitchen pays attention. A tired bowl of bagged greens and watery tomatoes tells you something too. Meatballs serve a similar role. Good ones are tender, seasoned all the way through, and paired with sauce that tastes like someone actually cooks it rather than opening a tub.

Garlic knots are a special case. In some pizzerias they are magnificent, blistered with garlic, parsley, olive oil, and enough chew to remind you that the dough matters. In others they are dry, stale, or aggressively buttery in a way that feels like compensation. They are rarely neutral.

What to drink with your first order

People tend to overcomplicate pizza pairings. On a first visit, the goal is not to stage a tasting menu. It is to enjoy the meal while keeping your palate clear enough to notice what the restaurant does well.

Water is obvious, but if you want an actual pairing, beer is the easiest match for many styles. A crisp lager works with almost everything. It cuts richness, cools spice, and does not dominate a simple pie. If the restaurant has a thoughtful draft list, ask for the cleanest, driest option rather than the hoppiest.

Wine can be excellent, especially with margherita, mushroom pies, white pizzas, or anything with prosciutto. A light red or a bright Italian white usually works better than a heavy, oaky bottle. Pizza has acid, salt, and fat. It wants refreshment more than force.

Soft drinks have their place, especially with pepperoni or sausage, and there is a reason cola and pizza remain a classic pairing. The sweetness offsets the salt and spice. For a casual first visit, that can be exactly right.

One caution: if the restaurant is known for spicy toppings, hot honey, or chile oil, be careful with sugary cocktails. They can make the heat feel muddier and the pizza heavier.

The trap of ordering the wildest specialty pie

Every pizza menu has one. Maybe it is topped with burrata, truffle cream, hot honey, soppressata, and arugula. Maybe it comes with barbecue sauce, chicken, pickled onions, and a drizzle of ranch. Maybe it is a seasonal pie with peaches, pancetta, and whipped ricotta. Some of these are genuinely excellent. Many are fun. They are just not the best first read on a pizza restaurant.

Specialty pies can mask inconsistency. A crust that is merely decent may seem better under a blanket of rich toppings. A salty sauce may disappear beneath sweet elements and finishing oils. That is why so many first-time visitors end up loving an overbuilt pie, then returning later for a plain cheese and wondering if they imagined the magic.

There are exceptions. If the specialty pizza is clearly the restaurant's hallmark, order it. Some places are known for one combination because they have refined it over years. The pie is not a stunt, it is the identity of the house. You can usually spot these by how confidently the menu presents them and how often you see them on neighboring tables.

Still, if you choose the signature pie, consider pairing it with something simple, even a side salad or a half-order of plain bread. That gives your palate a baseline and keeps the meal from feeling one-note.

Questions worth asking the server

A good server at a pizza restaurant can save you from ordering badly. You do not need to interrogate them. One or two smart questions is enough.

Ask what style of pizza the restaurant is most proud of. Ask whether the crust tends to be crisp, chewy, or soft in the center. Ask if one pie feeds one person or two, because menu sizes can be deceptive. I have seen twelve-inch pizzas that satisfy one hungry diner and sixteen-inch pies that comfortably feed three with a starter.

If you are between two options, phrase the question in a way that invites honesty. Instead of asking, “Is the white pizza good?” ask, “If this were your first time here, would you start with the white pizza or the pepperoni?” That gives the server room to make a real recommendation instead of defaulting to yes.

The quality of the answer often tells you something about the restaurant too. Staff who know the menu well tend to describe not just ingredients, but texture, portion, and style. They might say the sausage pie is their favorite because the sausage is made in-house and the fennel comes through, or that the margherita is beautiful but very soft in the middle, so it is best if you like a knife-and-fork pie. That kind of detail is useful.

If you are dining with a group, order for contrast

First visits are easier with three or four people because you can learn more without overeating. The trick is to avoid ordering three pizzas that all do the same thing. Contrast reveals more than repetition.

A balanced first group order often includes one foundational pie, one house specialty, and one pie that introduces a different flavor profile, maybe something with vegetables or heat. You do not need six pizzas and every appetizer. In fact, too much food can flatten the experience. After the third rich slice, nuance disappears.

Here is a practical way to think about it:

- one simple pie to judge fundamentals
- one signature pie to understand the restaurant’s personality
- one contrasting item, such as a salad or vegetable-forward pizza
- a drink choice that stays refreshing rather than heavy
- enough restraint to leave room for a second visit

This approach works because it lets you compare texture, seasoning, and balance without turning dinner into a project. You can notice whether the crust holds up across styles, whether the sauce remains balanced under different toppings, and whether the restaurant overuses salt, oil, or finishing garnishes.

I once went to a well-regarded neighborhood pizza restaurant with a group of five, and the table nearly made the classic mistake of ordering nothing but specialty pies. We adjusted at the last second and added a plain cheese. It ended up being the best thing on the table by a wide margin. The specialty pies were good, but the cheese pizza had the ideal ratio of sauce to mozzarella, and the crust had a deep, even browning the heavier pies never quite achieved. Without that baseline, we would have praised the meal without understanding what the kitchen actually did best.

When your personal preferences should override the “right” choice

There is a limit to all advice about first orders. If you hate mushrooms, do not order the mushroom pie just because the restaurant is known for it. If fresh mozzarella tends to upset your stomach, do not force a margherita

for the sake of being proper. If you are feeding children who only want plain cheese, there is no medal for making the table order anchovies and rapini.

The point of a smart first order is not to pass an exam. It is to give yourself the best chance of enjoying the meal while fairly understanding the restaurant. Personal preference matters. Sometimes the best order is the one that fits the moment. A quick lunch at a slice counter calls for a classic slice and a soda. A date night at an upscale pizza restaurant might justify a shared appetizer, a margherita, and a more adventurous second pie. A family dinner with mixed tastes may require one simple pie and one specialty pie to keep everyone happy.

Context changes everything. So does hunger. A very hungry table tends to over-order, then blame the restaurant for heaviness that came from their own enthusiasm. Start slightly smaller than you think, especially if the pizzas are rich or the crusts are thick. You can always add later.

Signs that you ordered well

By the time the meal is over, a good first order should leave you with a clear picture of the place. You should know whether the dough has character, whether the sauce tastes alive, whether the cheese is used with discipline, and whether the toppings are there to support the crust or bury it.

You should also know whether you would come back, and what you would order next time. That second part matters. The best pizza restaurants reveal more with repeat visits. Maybe the classic pie won you over, and next time you want to try the white pizza. Maybe the signature pie was excellent, but now you are curious about a sausage and onion build. Maybe the salad surprised you enough that you suspect the roasted vegetable pie is worth a shot.

A disappointing first visit is not always final, but it should at least be interpretable. If the plain pie lacks flavor, the crust is pale, and the toppings feel generic, that is useful information. If the specialty pie was too heavy but the dough seemed promising, maybe the move next time is simpler.

That is the real purpose of ordering well on a first visit. You are not just trying to get dinner right. You are trying to understand the restaurant on its own terms.

The short answer, if you want one

For most first visits to a pizza restaurant, order a classic pie that exposes the basics, usually plain cheese, pepperoni, or margherita, depending on the style of the house. Add one thoughtful side if you want a broader read on the kitchen. Save the overloaded custom build for later. Let the restaurant show you what it believes pizza should be.

That approach is rarely flashy, but it is the one that most often leads to a meal you remember for the right reasons.

Ruffrano's Hell's Kitchen Pizza Manitou Springs

9 Ruxton Ave, Manitou Springs, CO 80829

Phone: +1 719-685-4355

FAQ About pizza restaurant

Is There a Hell's Kitchen Pizza Restaurant in Manitou Springs?

Yes. Ruffrano's Hell's Kitchen Pizza Manitou Springs is located at 9 Ruxton Ave, Manitou Springs, CO 80829. Call +1 719-685-4355 to confirm current ordering and dining arrangements.

How Spicy Is a "Hellfire" Style Pizza Really?

The menu lists hot Italian sausage, pepperoni, cherry peppers and Hellfire sauce on the Hellfire pizza. Heat tolerance varies, so ask the restaurant about the sauce and possible adjustments before ordering if you prefer milder food.

What Kind of Sauce Is on BBQ Chicken Pizza?

The restaurant's menu lists BBQ sauce with mozzarella, chicken, onions and banana peppers on its BBQ Chicken pizza. Confirm current ingredients and any allergy requirements directly with the restaurant before ordering.