

Pizza Rustica (AKA Torta Rustica)

This is not really a pizza in the traditional sense. Sometimes it is referred to as a torta. In Naples and other parts of southern Italy it is traditionally served on Ash Wednesday and again on Easter so it is also known as Easter Pie. It is very unique in that it combines a sweet, tender, egg pastry dough (what the Italians call pasta frolla) with savory fillings. The sweet-savory combination comes alive in your mouth. It is one of my personal favorites.

If you are having a party and don't mind going to a little trouble—this delightful, unusual dish will impress your guests like few others. It looks gorgeous. It's delicious. And it tastes unlike anything they've ever had before. We made it for one of our wine dinners and it was one of the most popular dishes we've ever served. It would also be a perfect brunch entrée. It may be served hot or at room temperature.

Serves 8-10

Pasta Frolla Ingredients:

2-1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 cup sugar
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon baking powder
10 tablespoons (1-1/4 sticks) butter—
chilled—cut into small pieces
2 large eggs
Ice water
one 10 inch diameter x 2 inch deep cake
pan or spring form pan—buttered

Filling Ingredients:

4 large eggs
1-1/2 pounds ricotta
12 ounces mozzarella—coarsely grated
1/2 cup Pecorino Romano—grated
(or Parmigiano-Reggiano)
6 ounces prosciutto—diced
6 ounces salami (or other dried
sausage) - diced
6 tablespoons fresh parsley—chopped
1/2 teaspoon fresh ground pepper
1/2 teaspoon salt
egg wash: 1 egg well beaten with 1
teaspoon water and pinch of salt

Preparing the Pasta Frolla:

1. Place flour, sugar, salt and baking powder in food processor fitted with metal blade. Pulse 3-4 times to mix.
2. Add chilled butter. Pulse until 6 or 7 times until it resembles coarse meal. Add eggs and continue pulsing until it just begins to form a ball (if needed—add ice water in tiny amounts until it begins to come together). Do not overwork.
3. Remove dough and press it together with your hands. Divide into two pieces, the larger of which is two-thirds of the dough. Form each part into a round disk. Cover with plastic wrap and chill for a minimum of 30 minutes. Note: It can also be made several hours ahead, or even the day before.

Preparing the filling:

1. Place ricotta in a strainer lined with a cheesecloth or paper towels and allow to drain for 15-20 minutes to remove excess liquid.
2. Place eggs in a bowl and beat briefly with a whisk. Add ricotta and whisk until mixture is creamy.
3. Add all remaining filling ingredients and mix thoroughly with a large spoon until well blended.

Finishing the Pizza Rustica:

1. Set rack in middle of oven and preheat to 350° F.
2. Place two sheets of plastic wrap, side by side and slightly overlapping, on a moist surface (to keep them from sliding around). Unwrap the large chilled dough and place atop plastic wrap. Cover with two more sheets of overlapping plastic wrap. Gently roll the covered dough into approximately a 16" circle.

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Suggested Wine: *Salice Salentino*

Salice Salentino hails from the region of Apulia, the heel of Italy's boot. It is made mostly from the Negroamaro grape which means *black and bitter* or *blackest of the black*. For this reason I'm was surprised at how well it goes with this dish which has a sweetness to it. It is likely because of the ripeness brought about by the southern Italian sun.

Frankie's recommendation: *Terre del Grico "Salice Salentino"*

Pizza Rustica variations:

This version of Pizza Rustica is a fairly typical example of the fillings used in Naples from where it originates. Many variations are common however, and like any pizza, only your imagination will limit the possibilities. You can either blend them in with other fillings or layer on top. Some fillings which I like include...

- ◆ Spinach—you can use fresh or frozen. The thing to watch out for is extra moisture. If using fresh, cook it briefly to sweat out the excess moisture, and squeeze dry with paper towels or cheesecloth. If using frozen, squeeze dry also—though there is no need to cook it first.
- ◆ Roasted red peppers—you can roast your own (see procedure on page 76), or buy them canned—in which case you would want to drain off excess moisture.
- ◆ Italian sausage—either spicy or mild—pre-cooked.
- ◆ Substitute any cured meat for the salami such as mortadella, pepperoni, or sopressata.

Finishing the Pizza Rustica:

3. Remove the top sheets of plastic wrap. Gently place the dough, plastic wrap up, into the cake pan. Remove plastic wrap. Press dough into the pan, leaving some overlapping the top rim.
Note: It is very likely you will have some tearing of the pastry dough either during the transfer or when pressing it into the pan. Relax—this is easy to repair—simply press the dough together where it has torn and/or use excess dough to the repair holes.
4. Place the filling into the dough and smooth out the top. Cut off excess dough so that it extends about a half inch above the filling. Save the scraps—press together and wrap with plastic wrap.
5. Remove the smaller piece of dough and roll into approximately an 11-12 inch circle—using the method described above. Remove top layer of plastic wrap. Place the cake pan atop the dough and using a pairing knife—cut around the exterior of the pan to form a circular piece of dough for the top. Place atop filling. Save the remaining dough scraps with the others.
6. Fold the dough from the bottom crust over the edge of the top dough and gently press together to seal. With your pairing knife cut several vent holes in the top of the dough.
7. Form the scraps into a ball and roll out on a lightly floured surface. Cut into decorative shapes. Brush top dough with egg wash. Place decorative shapes atop dough and brush these also.
8. Bake on middle rack 50 to 55 minutes until top is nicely browned.
9. Cool in the pan on a rack for a minimum of 10 minutes. To unmold, take a pairing knife and run it around the edge of the pan to loosen the pie. Put a plate over the top of the pizza and invert it. Then place a flat serving plate or platter upon the bottom and invert again. If you have used a spring form pan, simply remove the sides. You can either leave it on the bottom tray or invert twice as described above to remove the bottom.
10. Allow to cool an additional 5 to 10 minutes before slicing—or for a few hours if you desire to serve at room temperature. Use a sharp knife for slicing.

Frankie's Tips:

The filling for this pizza is easy. The dough is more complicated but the good news is it is a very forgiving dough. Tears are easy to repair, and blemishes just add to it's rusticity. A few tips...

- ◆ It's very important that the butter is chilled. Otherwise the dough will be too soft and not flaky. It is also important that your dough is chilled before you begin to roll it out.
- ◆ You do not want to overwork the dough, which will make it tough and hard to work with. That is why you only want to process the dough until it starts to come together. Finish forming by hand.
- ◆ Some recipes call for the top crust to be a lattice. I personally prefer a solid crust decorated with pastry shapes. Either will work fine.
- ◆ One last tip—if you are inexperienced at rolling out dough, you will probably get frustrated at how the edges of the dough want to split. To begin with, go slow. Start by rolling gently from the center outwards, but then if it starts to split, push the split areas together and roll around the edges which will help it to come together. Deep breathing might help too!
- ◆ It also helps a lot to roll out the dough on a silicone baking mat. It makes it much easier to transfer.