mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Who invented pizza?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

[Video Call]

- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Celeste!
- I have a question for you. Who invented pizza?
- Ooh, that is a great question.

Pizza, mmm. This food gets so many people excited, doesn't it? I mean, there are not many other foods where the name of the food, plus the word *“party,”* seem to always go together. But what's the story behind pizza? Has it always been a thing? If not, who came up with it, and why?

I mean, when you really stop and think about it, pizza is kind of an odd combination of ingredients, right? You put cheese and tomato sauce on a piece of bread, and that tastes good?

Well, like so many questions about who invented a thing, the answer depends a lot on what you mean. If by pizza, you just mean a flat piece of bread with some kind of toppings on it—what today we call a flatbread—then it's impossible to give credit to any one person or even any one country for inventing it because flatbreads have been served in lots of countries for a really long time.

The country of Greece, for example, where they call it *“pita,”* instead of pizza. People in the country of Iran have also been making flatbreads for a long time, and people in the country of Lebanon, too. But if by pizza, you mean a flatbread with cheese, tomato sauce, and some kind of topping, then we have to look to a different country. Maybe you even know which one.

Before I say anything more, now would be a good time to pause the video and take a guess. Where do you think pizza was invented?

VIDEO 2

We have to look at the country of Italy, and one city in Italy especially, the city of Naples. In Naples, Italy, it's been popular for hundreds of years to put tomato sauce, mozzarella cheese, and some kind of toppings on a flattened piece of dough, then bake it in an oven until it's nice and crusty.

While we don't know of any one person in Naples who might've invented pizza, there's a story about a person who might be responsible for making pizza a worldwide sensation.

You see, a long time ago, pizza was not popular with everyone in Italy. People like the rich kings and queens of Italy considered it a poor person's food, especially since the ingredients were often things being used up so that they wouldn't go to waste. Got some leftover fish from dinner last night? Great, put it on the pizza. Got some leftover garlic? Put it on the pizza.

According to legend, all of this may have changed because of one person, an Italian baker named Raffaele Esposito. The queen of Italy herself, Queen Margherita, was visiting Raffaele's home city

of Naples, and Raffaele was invited to come to prepare a meal for her and the king—any meal he wanted to make.

Raffaele was determined to get the king and the queen to like pizza. Instead of using leftovers for toppings, he came up with an idea. For one of the pizzas he prepared for the queen, he would honor her by using the colors of the Italian flag. Tomatoes for red, mozzarella cheese for white, and basil leaf for green.

The queen loved it—or supposedly did anyway. Esposito said afterward that he received a letter from the queen herself, saying that she found his special pizza delicious. He framed it in his restaurant and named this style of pizza *Margherita pizza*, after the queen.

From that point on, pizza became a sensation. Lots of people all throughout Italy wanted to try it, and they loved it, too. Then it started spreading to other countries—Argentina, Brazil, the United States. Today, you can find pizza in just about every country on Earth, and each place makes it their own.

In Chicago, USA, near where I grew up, they're famous for their deep-dish pizza. Or my personal favorite, the small town of Palmyra, Missouri, where my wife is from. People put sauerkraut on their pizza. I know that might sound gross, but I'm telling you, I tried it, and I think it's great.

There are even ingredients today that make it possible for people who can't eat bread or who can't have cheese to still be able to enjoy the taste of pizza.

So in summary, pizza hasn't always been a thing. Someone had to invent it. We don't know exactly who that was, but the country of Italy gets the credit for the kind of pizza we're all used to.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Celeste, for asking it!