

Pizza in the United States: A History and Industry Review

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Pizza is a common and popular food, adaptable to a wide variety of flavours and preferences. However, it was not always this way. Pizza began as a particular product of Italian immigrants in the United States, but it managed to grow into an adaptable and stable industry that remains to this day. Understanding the history of pizza can help us to understand how the industry has managed to remain standing in the face of technological changes, consumer choices, and economic disruption.

² The History of Pizza

Pizza first made its appearance in the United States with the arrival of Italian immigrants in the late 19th century and was popular among large Italian populations in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Trenton, and St. Louis. However, pizza was not as popular then as it is now. ⁷ The food was primarily seen as a “bizarre ethnic oddity” that did not suit the larger American population (Marino and Crocco, 2015, p. 152). This was not only the case for pizza, but could also be applied to many other ethnic foods brought by the growing immigration population, especially on the eastern seaboard.

¹ World War Two altered America’s culinary and dietary practices. One common explanation for this change is that American servicemen returning from overseas had developed a taste for “exotic” foods from foreign cultures and now wanted access to these at home. Changes in the American lifestyle—increased disposable income and family sizes, suburbanization, and changes in the workplace—all contributed to the popularity of a food that could be made quickly and easily, as well as the invention of the frozen pizza. As Marino and Crocco note (2015), ³ convenience became an important value for family life in post-World War Two America, and pizza fit neatly into this framework. (p. 153).

Pizza changed quickly throughout the later twentieth century. As frozen foods became more popular and easier to produce with the advancement of food technologies, so too did the popularity of pizza grow with it. The 1970s were a time of growth in pizzerias, and many of the pizza chains we are familiar with today were established. It didn't take long for frozen pizza sales to drop off to a point where there were concerns about the future of the frozen pizza market. Frozen-food manufacturers were not about to allow a market to be stripped away from them without a fight, however. "Instead, they ³ began to introduce high-quality frozen pizzas, with generous amounts of toppings and quality ingredients" (Lehmann, 2004, p. 60). By the 1990s, frozen pizzas were again a popular quick-dinner snack as another shift in the U.S. economy and social dynamics made it so American families became busier with less time for sit-down meals.

Industry Review

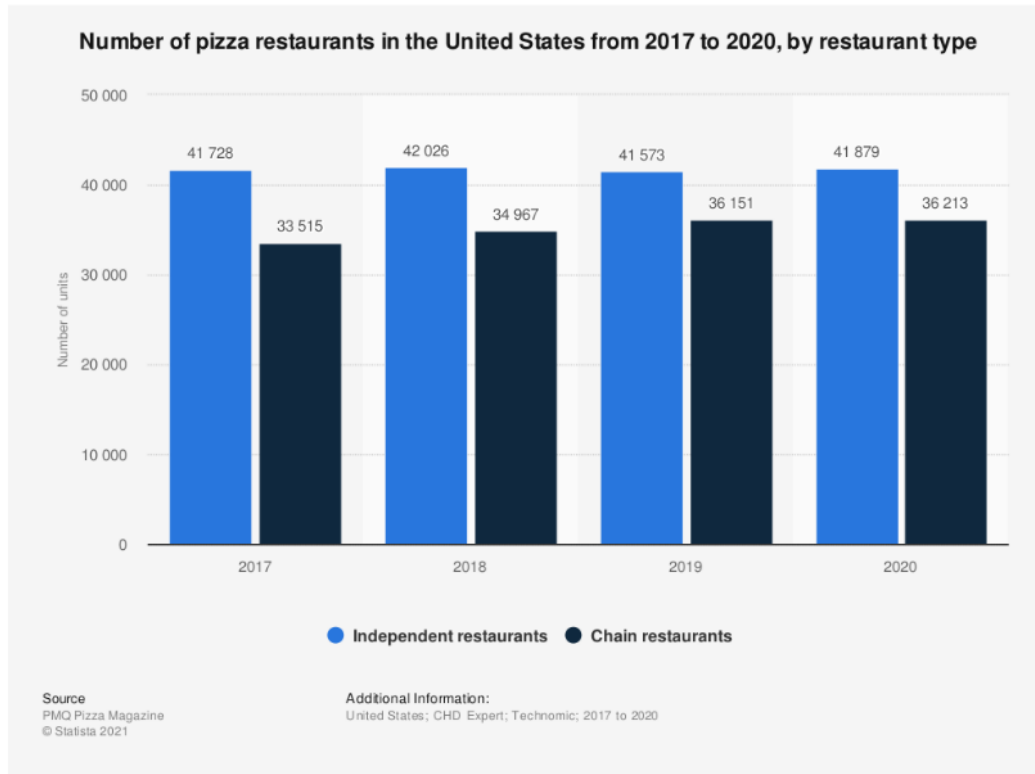
The pizza restaurant industry, including sit-down and take-away restaurants, has adapted to a number of changes to both the industry specifically and larger socio-economic and technological changes.

Economic Landscape

Pizza restaurants are a staple of the American restaurant landscape. While the Covid-19 pandemic impacted sales and closures across the industry, pizza restaurants managed to remain relatively stable with \$46.2 billion in industry revenue in 2020 (Le, 2020). Additionally, the number of pizza restaurants has only slightly increased over the past four years. As seen in Figure 1, the number of independent pizza restaurants has remained larger than that of chain restaurants; however, Table 2 shows that independent pizzerias, while remaining relatively steady, have not had as substantial growth as chain stores.

Figure 1

5
Number of Pizza Restaurants in the United States from 2017 to 2020, by Restaurant Type



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Note. From “Number of pizza restaurants in the United States from 2017 to 2020, by restaurant type” by Statista, <https://www-statista-com>. Copyright 2021 by Statista.

Table 1

Pizza restaurant store locations, 2019 to 2021.

	Independent Pizzerias		Chain Stores		Total Pizza Industry	
	Locations	Change	Locations	Change	Locations	Change
2019	42,026	+0.71%	34,967	+4.15%	76,993	+2.27%
2020	41,573	-1.09%	36,151	+3.27%	77,724	+0.01%
2021	41,879	+0.73%	36,213	+0.17%	78,092	+0.47%

Note. Independent pizzerias are those with less than 10 units; chain stores are those with more than 10 units.

While pizza restaurants themselves remain steady, a study by the US Department of Agriculture found that the average American increased their time spent purchasing non-grocery food by 26.4 percent from 2004-07 to 2014-17. Consumers aged 25 to 44 and 45 to 64 were found to have the largest market segmentation due to a higher disposable income (Le, 2020). For the 25 to 44 age group this can be primarily attributed to recent trends of having children and buying homes later, leaving people with a larger percentage of their income to spend on non-grocery foods (Le, 2020). ⁶ Consumers have been indicating a preference for quick-service pizza shops, where pizza can be ordered online. However, in early 2020, the COVID-19 forced people to deal with shelter-in-place orders so their demand for food delivery, which is a major revenue stream for industry operators, increased.

Consumer Preferences and Health

The pizza restaurant industry has also been heavily impacted by changes in consumer preferences, to which the industry must adapt. Throughout the twentieth-century this accounted

for an increase in the popularity of pizza and a demand for ready-made and frozen meals, as noted above. ⁴ Consumers are increasingly insisting on the freshest, healthiest ingredients, a trend driven largely by younger segments of consumers, who also demand the highest technology available to facilitate ease of ordering and delivery.

Conclusion

The pizza restaurant industry has adapted itself to a number of social and economic changes. Pizza went from an ethnic food to a popular, fast meal for families with more income and less time on their hands. Technological shifts have allowed pizza to enter the frozen foods market and adapt to consumer health demands. Even with the economic decline of the Covid-19 pandemic, the future of pizza appears relatively stable.

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