



# The Great American Pizza Challenge

**OFFICIAL Rules and Regulations: Traditional Thin-Crust, Non-Traditional Thin-Crust, Pepperoni Slice, Gluten-Free, Dessert Pizza, Garlic Knots/Breadsticks & Young Pizza Maker of the Year.**  
(Columbus Convention Center - October 11-12, 2026)

## Eligibility

The 2026 Great American Pizza Challenge (GAPC) is open to individuals aged 18+ working in the pizza industry. Eligible participants include owners, operators, and employees of brick-and-mortar pizzerias, pizza pop-ups, food trucks/trailers, and restaurants serving pizza. The young pizza maker of the year competition is open to competitors aged 16 - 17 years old. Pizza Today and Pizza Expo employees / family members, speakers, and demonstrators, employees or representatives of advertisers, exhibitors, and other suppliers to the industry or their affiliates are not eligible. If a competitor falsely claims any position or title affiliated with the IPC or GAPC, they will be suspended from competing in any IPC/GAPC for a minimum of 2 years and possibly expelled from any IPC/GAPC competition permanently.

Past division winners are not eligible to compete in the same division for a period of two years.

## Registration

Registration for all seven (7) divisions is open online at [PizzaExpo.com \(https://pizzaexpocolumbus.pizzatoday.com/competitions/\)](https://pizzaexpocolumbus.pizzatoday.com/competitions/) and will remain open until all available places are taken. Competitors may enter the competition when they register to attend Pizza Expo Columbus, or a spot in one of the divisions may be added later to an attendee registration by logging in to the PizzaExpoColumbus.com registration system. A valid registration is interpreted as the acceptance by the competitor of all competition rules (below).

A maximum of 75 entries will be accepted in the Traditional Thin, Non-Traditional Thin, and Garlic Knots/Breadsticks divisions, 100 for Best Pepperoni Slice and 60 for Dessert Pizza, 50 for Gluten-Free, and 15 for the Young Pizza Maker of the Year competition. Multiple divisions per competitor will be accepted, with a maximum of fourteen (14) entries per establishment (two competitors from each establishment per division). Only registered



competitors will be allowed in the competition area; no assistants may go into that area. Please note: You must be pre-registered as a Pizza Expo attendee to enter. Entries will not be accepted until registration and competition fees are paid. No on-site entries will be permitted, unless approved by the Show Management.

Entries close in any division once it reaches the above-mentioned maximum number of participants. Please contact Bill Oakley, Group Show Director, at [boakley@pizzatoday.com](mailto:boakley@pizzatoday.com) to be added to the wait list if your division(s) of choice is full.

### **Judging & Scoring**

Each competitor will have 25 minutes to assemble and bake their pizza. Competitors must also clean up their assembly space, which may be done prior to or immediately after presenting the pizza for judging. Cleanup time is not included in your 25 minutes. Competitors will be timed by Pizza Expo Columbus staff. Failure to adhere to time restrictions or to clean up in a presentable fashion will result in an automatic deduction of 5 points on each judge's scorecard.

All pizzas in all categories will be judged blind. Pizza will be presented to judges whole, then brought back out to be cut (unless otherwise specified in special rules by division). This means your ingredient card cannot contain brand names, product names, or anything else that makes you identifiable. Your ingredient card should only include a brief description of your pizza. Please do not include details about your process, techniques, or story. No identifiable serving items such as special serving plates, skewers, or other items are permitted. Breaking these rules in any way will result in immediate disqualification.

Beverage pairing is not allowed in any division.

Pizzas for all divisions will be scored by an expert panel of judges, based on how well the pizza executes on each scoring category, using a scale of 1-10 for each scoring category. These categories vary per division, but may include scores for crust, sauce, cheese, toppings, bake, overall taste, creativity, and appearance. Pizzas are judged against themselves, not against other entries.

Scores will be announced on the Pizza Expo Facebook and X pages the evening the division runs. Some divisions may be announced earlier, so please pay attention to announcements at the show. All scores will be posted to Pizza Expo socials as soon as possible the night of the event.



Decisions by the judges are final in all aspects of this competition.

Score sheets, which may include feedback from judges, will be available upon request after December 1, 2026. Please email your request to [jeremy@masterpizza.com](mailto:jeremy@masterpizza.com) after that date.

### **Prizes / Awards**

First-place winners of the Traditional Thin and Non-Traditional Thin divisions will receive a plaque and a check for \$1,000. Second and third place will receive \$750 and \$300, respectively. The first-place winners of the Pepperoni Slice, Gluten-Free, Dessert, and Garlic Knot/Breadstick divisions will receive \$1,000. Second and third place will receive \$750 and \$300 respectively for all four divisions. Within both thin-crust divisions, the top scoring Tavern Style, Columbus Style, New Haven Style, St. Louis Style, NY Thin, and Flat Bread will receive \$100 and a recognition plaque. Regional winners of the America's Best Pepperoni Slice competition will receive certificates. The first-place winner of the Young Pizza Maker of the Year competition will claim the title of Young World Champion, a plaque and an additional \$250 prize. Second and third place will receive \$200 and \$100, respectively.

Winners will be expected to provide banking information and taxpayer identification number (W-9/8) at the conclusion of the competition to facilitate the payment. Payment cannot be initiated until the W9/8 is completed and terms will be Net 90 days AFTER the initiation. Payment of any local, state, or federal taxes are the responsibilities of the winners. There will be no substitutions of prizes as offered except at the discretion of Pizza Expo Columbus®. Prizes are non-transferable.

### **General Rules**

Competitors must provide their own dough, sauce, cheese, and toppings. Competitors may make and submit only one (1) pizza per competition division. This competition has only one round per division; there are no semi-finals or finals. Please note that some products may be available thanks to our preferred product sponsors. A limited prep kitchen will be available prior to and during the competition. Competitors will receive an email prior to the competition with details about available ovens, storage, refrigeration, and other items provided in these areas. Basic kitchen items will be available but if you need something specific, please bring it with you.

Ingredient preparation will be allowed in the designated prep areas prior to your table time to allow immediate building of the pizza as soon as a competitor hits their table. Each



competitor will make one (1) pizza for their division. If a competitor, at their own fault, drops, burns, rips, or otherwise fails to complete their pizza, they will NOT be allowed to make a second pizza.

## Special Rules by Division

\*NOTE: For the purposes of this competition, the term “par-baking” refers to the process of partially baking a pizza crust in advance of the competition time limit (25 minutes), only to be topped and finished during the allotted competition time.

### **AMERICA’S BEST PEPPERONI SLICE**

Competitors provide the dough, red tomato sauce, cheese/cheese blend, pepperoni(s), and spices. Multiple pepperonis may be used. **\*Par-baking or partial baking of dough is permitted in this division but must be done on-site and panned out in front of an GAPC team official.** Once the pizza enters the oven, the only acceptable additions are oil (flavored or not), grated cheese, and fresh or dry spices/herbs. **NO** other drizzle, topping, cheese, or work on the pizza is allowed once the pizza enters the oven. **After your slices are cut, you may place them back in the oven to reheat before serving to the judges, but this must be accomplished within the 25 min time frame.** Please note this division is **open to all crust styles**. You may choose your best three (3) slices for presentation to the judges.

### **NON-TRADITIONAL THIN CRUST DIVISION**

There are no restrictions on sauce or toppings. “Thin Crust” is generally defined as having a baked dough base no greater than 0.75 cm/0.295 inches in height, excluding the cornicione. Styles that fall into this division include, but are not limited to, the following: Tavern Style, Columbus Style, New Haven Style, St. Louis Style, NY Thin, and Flatbread. Dessert pizzas are not allowed in this division. Pizzas in this division should be between 12 and 18-inches.

### **TRADITIONAL THIN-CRUST DIVISION**

Competitors provide their own dough, cheese/cheese blend, and spices. Pizzas must include a red tomato sauce. No more than two(2) of the following toppings may be added: pepperoni, sausage, bacon, ham, mushrooms, peppers, tomatoes, onions, and olives.



Please note that multiple varieties of a single topping will constitute only one (1) topping (e.g. multiple types of mushroom count as a single topping). Once the pizza enters the oven, the only acceptable additions are oil (flavored or not), grated cheese, and fresh or dry spices/herbs; **NO** other drizzles, toppings, cheeses, or work on the pizza is allowed once the pizza enters the oven. “Thin Crust” is generally defined as having a baked dough base no greater than 0.75 cm/0.295 inches in height, excluding the cornicione. Styles that fall into this division include, but are not limited to, the following: Tavern Style, Columbus Style, New Haven Style, St. Louis Style, NY Thin, and Flatbread. A competitor’s pizza will be disqualified if the judges decide it contains too many toppings or unacceptable toppings. Pizzas in this division should be between 12 to 18-inches.

### **GLUTEN-FREE DIVISION**

There are no restrictions in this division, except that all ingredients must be Gluten-Free. Par-baking is permitted but must be done on-site Saturday, October 10 between the conclusion of the Competitor meeting and 8 pm on Saturday or Sunday between 7 a.m. and their cook time. Please see GAPC Team Official to parbake.

### **DESSERT PIZZA DIVISION**

There are no restrictions in this category beyond a requirement that all entries be open-faced dough-based pizzas. Pizzas in this division may be presented whole or by the slice. Once presented there can be no NEW dressings or garnishments done to the pizza.

### **GARLIC KNOT / BREADSTICK**

There are no restrictions on dough preparations or styles. Dough may not contain meat, cheese, or produce inclusions. In addition to the cooked bread component, the only permissible additions are garlic butter/margarine, oil (flavored or not), dry grated cheeses, and dry/fresh herbs. Competitors **must** submit a side of RED tomato-based dipping sauce with their entry.



## 2026 Schedule

Sunday, October 11th

### 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM

- America's Best Dessert Pizza – 60 competitors
  - America's Best Traditional Thin Pizza – 75 competitors
- Highest Scoring by Style:
- Tavern Style
  - Columbus Style
  - New Haven Style
  - St. Louis Style
  - NY Thin
  - Flat Bread
- America's Best Gluten-Free – 50 competitors
  - America's Best Breadsticks/Garlic Knots – 75 competitors

### Monday, October 12th

#### 8:00 AM – 2:00 PM

- America's Best Pepperoni Slice – 100 competitors
- Highest Scoring by Region
- Mid-America
  - Northeast
  - Southeast
  - Northwest
  - Southwest
  - Canadian
  - International
- America's Best Non-Traditional Thin-Crust Pizza – 75 competitors
- Highest Scoring by Style:
- Tavern Style
  - Newhaven Style
  - Columbus Style
  - St. Louis Style
  - NY Thin
  - Flat Bread

#### 12:00 PM – 2:00 PM

- Young Pizza Maker of the Year (Non-Traditional) – 15 competitors



# The Great American Pizza Challenge™ 2026 FAQs

## Check-In, Show Floor Access & Competitor Meeting

We will have a GAPC check-in table out front by registration from 3-4pm on Saturday. You can check-in there to get your wristbands after you get your show badge. Your badge and wristband will serve as your early and late access pass onto the show floor. Once you have your wristband on Saturday you can enter the show floor to access refrigeration and the competition area. **You cannot gain access to refrigeration before 3pm on Saturday.** We will have a non-mandatory **BUT VERY IMPORTANT** competitor meeting at 4pm on Saturday in the competition area. At this meeting we will review the rules in detail, have a Q & A session. Sunday and Monday you can get onto the floor as early as 7am and as late as 8pm Sunday and 3pm Monday with your wristbands.

## Product / Ingredients

You must bring all the ingredients you need to make your pizza. No ingredients will be provided except for possibly some emergency flour from General Mills, but you should still bring your own if possible. Plan on making one (1) pizza for your division and have extra dough for test baking Saturday night and then Sunday and Monday before and after the competition. For ALL divisions each contestant will make 1 (one) pizza, see the division specific rules for specific details.

## Refrigeration

You will have access to refrigeration **after you check in at 3pm out front at the GAPC table by show registration, NOT BEFORE.** Refrigeration is provided through the end of the show on Monday. Anything left in the coolers will be donated or otherwise discarded.

## Making Dough

Show management will have a dough making area available to any competitor who wants to make dough on-site Saturday after the 4pm meeting and all day all other days. NO assistants will be allowed to assist in par-baking or other baking of crusts.



## **Assistants and Equipment**

**No assistants** will be allowed in the actual prep and baking area. Seating will be provided for others to watch the competition. Jeremy Galvin and Michael LaMarca will be our onsite contest coordinators. They and their team will be present to help guide you throughout the entire process of making, baking and presenting to the judges. In addition, they will also be timing you to ensure we stay on schedule. We will have ample deck and conveyor ovens available for your use. All the pizza tools (knives, cutters, peels) will be provided, so you do not have to bring them if you don't want to but if you have a specific pan or uncommon pizza peel, please feel free to do so. Show management will have a variety of pan sizes available, but we recommend you bring your own pans or screens. Exceptions will be made for competitors with disabilities.

## **Pizza Ovens**

We should have plenty of gas and electric deck, conveyor, and brick ovens available for use. We will be able to provide a list of the ovens several weeks prior to the show that will be updated as necessary.

## **Cook times etc.**

Approximately two (2) weeks out from the tradeshow, we will send out a roster that will include a window for your cook time. This time is a window of time that you will likely be assigned to a competition table. Please have all your prep done and be prepared to start once you arrive at your assigned table. We want you to be able to begin assembly of your pizza immediately as soon as you have been assigned a table. Please arrive **AT LEAST** 1-2 hours before your time window and check in with Michael LaMarca so that he can begin to plan your table time, etc.

## **Scoring / Judging**

We will discuss the judging criteria and score sheets at the meeting and answer any questions you might have. The main criteria the judges will use are taste and visual presentation/appearance. All divisions will have three (3) judges that are secluded from the competitors and public. The highest and lowest scores will be averaged together and then averaged with the other score to compute the final score. In the event of a tie, the highest point total for overall taste will determine the winner. When or if your pizza being judged by a panel of five (5) judges, then the high and low scores will be discarded to calculate the final score. For additional information, please review the GAPC rules and regulations.



The GAPC does not have a finals round, so all divisions will be one and done.