

# Anthony Mongiello, Inventor of the Stuffed Crust Pizza

*Published 4 March 2024, with Anthony Mongiello.*

Stolen Dough, a documentary, tells the story of how a kid from Brooklyn invented the stuffed crust pizza, sued Pizza Hut for ripping him off, and lost. It is a fascinating story that left me in no doubt about who actually invented the stuffed crust pizza: Anthony Mongiello, that kid from Brooklyn. But it was the incidental asides Anthony dropped in the documentary, along with a look at Formaggio Cheese, the company he built, that really made me want to talk to him about his family of cheese engineers and his own history as a cheese inventor.

**Anthony:** When my dad was in his business, right, and he sold the machine, he brought home a new car. But when he didn't sell a machine for a year ... It was feast or famine. We ate pasta every night. It's just the way it was. So, when I left college, and again, all anybody wants is for their kids to do better than they did. Right? So I went to college. I tried because I promised my mother I would go, to be honest with you. And it just wasn't for me. And I left and I went to work for one of my dad's friends, and he was the largest Pollio cheese distributor in the metropolitan area at the time. And that's where I fell in love with cheese and cheese making.

**Jeremy:** Polly-O cheese is still going strong, but you heard Anthony mention his dad and a machine. Well, that's what piqued my interest, because in the documentary, Anthony describes his father and grandfather as cheese engineers. So what's all that about?

**Anthony:** Well, my grandfather, if we start this way, he came from Italy in the early 1900s. And what he did in Italy is, he was a tinsmith, so he worked with very thin metal. And when he came to America, he brought his trade with him. Now, back in the 1900s, the 20s, all ricotta ... So ricotta means to recook the milk, and ricotta is, after you separate the curds and whey from making mozzarella, the first step in coagulating the milk, you're left with the whey. And the whey still has a

lot of milk solids in it. So you add a little more starter or vinegar, and then you heat it up very hot. And then it comes to the top of the tank or kettle, like a head on a beer. And then you hand dip this ricotta and you have to put it into a container that has holes in it. So my grandfather made these metal cans with holes in them so the whey would come out, because if there was too much water retained in the can, you couldn't cook with it. It would be too soupy. You follow me. So my dad going with his dad into all these cheesemaking facilities would see men, what he called, painstakingly moulding fresh mozzarella by hand.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, I mean, I've seen that. You've got your hands in practically boiling water. I mean, maybe you get used to it, but ...

**Anthony:** Well, years ago, there was no other method until my dad created while in ... He was born in the United States, my dad. So he's credited in the United States for creating the very first automated mozzarella moulding machine. And he went to college and he graduated and had a certificate to be an optometrist. But his passion was creating cheese machines because he was an inventor.

**Jeremy:** So now, I sort of looked at the patents. I'm not an engineer, but it looks like this. You've got this giant tub of mozzarella and it's being squeezed out and somehow rolled around. And I mean, it's like a mechanical version of hands rolling the ball.

**Anthony:** It is. It actually is, and it's the closest you could get. And his biggest claim to fame. And I'll tell you what it was. Back then, let's say in the 50s and the 60s, right. [It] was that when you make mozzarella or any product for the retail supermarkets, what happens is weights and measures years ago was really on top of this kind of stuff. And if you sold a product that was underweight, you could get fined for every piece that was on the shelf. So my dad created this ratchet adjustable system for his moulding machine that could bring it down to grams. Because Joe Pollio was giving away pounds of cheese every production he would make because he had to be overweight, but he couldn't adjust the tolerances, you follow me, so he would give away too much product. But my dad's machine, like a clock, where you were able, like a watch, to be able to manipulate it in such a way where you were only over by grams. And that's what really sold his equipment to these big commercial manufacturers was because they were losing a lot of money, and this really helped them.

**Jeremy:** So Anthony Mongiello's dad sells his mozzarella moulding machines to the big cheese makers like Joe Pollio and Sorrento Cheese, and Anthony drops out of college and goes to work for one of Pollio's distributors. And the cheese they're distributing is mozzarella.

**Anthony:** It is mozzarella. I'm going to tell you a little bit of history here. I've watched through my years the industry change. So years ago, when my dad first created the mozzarella machine to mould the mozzarella, it was fresh mozzarella because that's all there was years ago. And then on his machine from this round ball, they turned them into these little square blocks that they called consumer-sized mozzarella. And it didn't have the fat and the moisture that fresh mozzarella had. And it was more conducive, believe it or not, for cooking because there was less moisture in it. But the whole industry changed to these square mozzarellas that they called consumer-sized mozzarella, 8, 12 and 16 oz, how they were sold. And then it was the late 80s, while I had the job with the Pollio distributor, he decided to hire one of those men from years ago that my dad would see moulding mozzarella by hand. And he started to make fresh mozzarella again. And that's when the industry started to change back to fresh mozzarella. And that was in the late 80s. So I started my company in '91, and people wanted fresh mozzarella instead of just a consumer-sized one they would buy in the supermarket. And I watched that whole transition, you know, take place in my life, to be honest.

**Jeremy:** But now that consumer block of mozzarella, which is completely unlike anything we've got here in Italy, is that the stuff that goes onto pizza or is fresh mozzarella? I mean, I've seen all kinds of strange things about the cheese that goes on pizza in the big chains.

**Anthony:** Yes. Now what happens is, mozzarella in the United States is the number one consumed cheese because of pizza. Now pizza cheese is its own type of mozzarella. It's a low moisture mozzarella. And to me it's very similar to those consumer-sized squares I was telling you about that my dad's machine made. So they come usually in a 4½ by 4½ size loaf. It weighs about five pounds. It's probably about a foot long, maybe 14 inches, and it's four inches by four inches on average. But they take that, and because it's low moisture, you're able to shred it. Right? And then the pizzerias can put it onto a pizza.

Now, when the transition happened back in the 80s, brick oven pizzerias started coming out again. And people wanted the wood fired or coal fired and those pizzas were topped, and today are still topped, with fresh mozzarella. But it's not a fresh mozzarella that's going to be, let's say, 52% moisture or higher, because that will create soup on the pie. So the fresh mozzarella that's used in the brick oven pizza is a lower moisture than a standard fresh mozzarella, but higher than a pizza cheese.

Now here's the main difference in my mind, okay, as a cheese maker. Pizza cheese, the milk is coagulated using a live bacteria culture. So they turn the milk sour with the culture that they add to it. Unlike what we do in the US, which is we use a vinegar base and they add vinegar, a direct acidification of the milk, and that coagulates the milk and then starts that process to create mozzarella. So the product, when it's made with a culture, like pizza cheese, has a very distinctive flavour and a different characteristic. So fresh mozzarella will not, let's say, melt as much as a pizza cheese would. But also, it's the kind of thing you would do and make fresh and eat immediately. Pizza cheese is meant to, you know, be shredded, sit out for hours, go on a pie, go in the oven, come out, sit out for hours. Someone comes in, you want a slice, you take it, put it back in the oven, and it sort of comes back to life, but it doesn't come back to life because it was never alive to me. It was always dead.

**Jeremy:** The other aspect of this is this whole business of string cheese. Now your your dad invented string cheese.

**Anthony:** My dad was a cheese machine maker, and he had an idea, and what he wanted to do was create a nutritious snack for children. I'm 280 pounds. I've been a big kid my whole life. So I guess he'd see me eating potato chips or cookies or cakes and what have you, and said, look, there's got to be a better way. So being that the mozzarella business or industry was his life, he wanted to create a snack for children and he wanted it to be nutritious. So I actually made the very first string cheese that I could think of, and that was in my dad's machine shop. He took this big hunk of plastic and he drilled holes in it about a half inch diameter, about 4 or 5 inches long. And I proceeded to make mozzarella and with a piston in my hand, a plunger, and push it into the mould to fill that cavity of a cheese stick. Now let's understand this. It's called string cheese. Why?

**Jeremy:** Because it's stringy.

**Anthony:** It does string. But there's a reason that it strings. And as a cheese maker, I want to explain it to you. Pasta filata, the act of stretching the curds to make the mozzarella, when you inject it into a moulding machine to make a ball, it's a very short distance. When you extrude it to make a string cheese, you're pulling those curds very long. And thus every time you string a string cheese, you're looking at individual curds that have been stretched through the cooking and the moulding process. And that's what creates the strings in string cheese.

Now string cheese, if we understand this, pizza cheese sold back then, if we understand marketing and business, for about \$1.50 a pound in the 80s; pizza cheese sold in bulk to pizzerias, shredded and put on pies. Same product — low moisture pizza cheese — in a one ounce cheese stick, sold for \$12 a pound retail. That's how you make money.

But the concept was to create a one ounce cheese stick as a nutritious snack. So when we talk about creating products and items, you have to understand, number one, your demographics and to understand who's going to eat this product within those demographics, because you gotta ... You want to sell the kids, but you got to sell the parents as well. So that was a double whammy for them. My dad as being a positive because of the fact that it not only sold this product for more money for the manufacturer, the mother would buy it for the child because she felt it was nutritious alternative for a snack for their child, and the kids happen to love it. So it was a win-win all the way around. But here's the deal. The first company in the United States to come out with the one ounce cheese stick was Pollio Dairy. I was present when my dad showed this product, the concept of the one ounce cheese stick to Joe Pollio Senior.

**Jeremy:** And can I ask you a very direct question? How do you, or how did your dad, get money out of presenting the concept to somebody else who runs with it? Is it a licensing deal?

**Anthony:** The truth is, my dad asked Joe for half a penny a pound back then in the '80s. And Joe didn't want to do it, and my dad didn't make a penny. Just like I didn't make a penny off my stuffed crust pizza. How crazy is that? But you can't take away the fact of who the true creator is of the concept.

**Jeremy:** I'm going to come back to the stuffed crust pizza, I promise. But I want to know, do you come to Italy often?

**Anthony:** I don't come often, but I plan on going in the next year or so.

**Jeremy:** Because when I look at the product range on your website, the format, your website, there are a million different versions of cheeses; marinated, flavoured blah blah blah. We don't have that here in Italy. And I just wondered, do you think we're missing out?

**Anthony:** I do. Well, the truth is, what I do and the reason I do what I do, is like this. When I started in 1991, I sold what everybody else sold Jeremy, fresh mozzarella. They sold it in water. Ciliegini, bocconcini, ovolini, eight ounce and one pound in water. Maybe you had a hand wrap and maybe you had a smoke. When there was a prosciutto roll on the market, it looked like a hockey puck. We would make five pound mozzarella mattresses, lined them with the Italian meats and roll them up, right? And then when you sliced it and you presented it, it looked like a hockey puck. It was about an inch tall and about three inches, four inches in diameter. But it wasn't conducive for a consumer to use. So when we talk about the United States and we talk about bringing fresh mozzarella and introducing it, all you could buy in a case to grab and go was mozzarella in the water. And the only people that bought it were Italian people, because they're the only people who knew what to do with it.

So what I did is, I was selling what everybody else was, and I went to a store one day and it was a retail store, and I wanted to sell the mozzarella. And I said, look, I want to sell you my mozzarella. He says, Anthony, you're a nice guy, but I've been buying mozzarella from this guy for five years. Why should I buy yours? The truth is, I didn't have a good answer. I said, I'll give you a better price. Well, I gave him a better price, and that lasted for a week. And then, lo and behold, the other guy was back in the week after. And the only person that benefited was the store owner, because he got a better price on his mozzarella, and I was out.

I went to my dad and I said, Pop, how am I going to build a business off the heels of such a rocky foundation here, where I can get the business today and lose it tomorrow for a nickel a pound? He says to me, that's because you're selling items everybody else is, and if you

created your own items, you'd be able to create your own customer base and you'd be able to name your own price. And that's what I did. I set out and I walked the stores and I looked for the voids, and I say, okay, how do I expand the customer base of fresh mozzarella? If the only people that know what to do with mozzarella in the water are Italian people, well, what do I do with it?

As an Italian, when I bring it home, I marinate it. Well, what if I marinated in the factory and put it in a cup and the flavour profile is all done? Could I attract other ethnicities to possibly buy the product and enjoy it the way we do? And the answer is yes. And that's what I've done. I've been for 32 years, creating different ways for people to enjoy fresh mozzarella, whether they're paired with fresh herbs, spices, garlic, roasted garlic, whether we pair them with Italian meats, prosciutto, sopressata, pepperoni. It doesn't make a difference.

Let's take a step back and realise that fresh mozzarella is made directly from milk. And milk in its own right, doesn't have a lot of flavour, and neither does fresh mozzarella. But fresh mozzarella to me, as an artist, is my canvas. And what I can do with that canvas to create new items, items that are consumer friendly, items that are value added items. Well, that's what I've sunk my teeth into and done for the last 32 years of my adult life, and ...

**Jeremy:** Okay, let's go back to the beginning, and the stuffed crust pizza. So some people don't know what a stuffed crust pizza is. I confess I've never eaten one. What is a stuffed crust pizza?

**Anthony:** I'm glad you asked me, Jeremy. The point is that I was in Brooklyn, and a friend of mine, her mom, asked me if I could make pizza. She knew I worked at a cheese distributor, and I could bring the cheese. She says to me, Anthony, I'll make the sauce. Right? Nice Italian lady. And I said, okay, great. I'll stop at a bakery and I'll buy some dough and we'll make pizza. Great. So I go to the bakery, and the local bakery sells dough balls. So when I got back to the house and I'm looking at the dough balls, I realised that the dough balls I'm looking at are nowhere near the size of the one I see the pizzaiolo guy behind the counter stretching in the pizzerias in Brooklyn. So I said, what do I do now? I have to put two doughs together to create this, this sized dough that I'm going to need to make the pie.

So with that, I go ahead and I proceed to stretch the dough, and I realise how thin the bottom crust has to be. So I accidentally push all

of the excess dough into the crust area. And there is an excess, because in retrospect, after thinking about it, I had a raw crust as thick as a cooked crust. Well, in my head it looked right, but not realising it wasn't cooked yet. So all this extra dough is sitting around this pizza. I went ahead and put sauce and cheese, and I put it in the oven, and I'm looking through the glass door of the oven as the pizza is cooking, and I'm getting embarrassed and I'm saying, oh my God, what did I do? Because that crust that was as big as a cooked crust but was raw, started to grow and grow and grow in size. Now you know what a zeppole is, right?

**Jeremy:** Yeah.

**Anthony:** So imagine a zeppole-sized crust all the way around this pizza. I felt embarrassed, it was huge. And I took it out of the oven. There was nothing wrong with it. It just looked funny. So we cut it and we proceeded to eat it. Well, I turned it sideways, Jeremy, and like a zeppole I bit into it. And when you bite into a piece of dough, it'll collapse and then open again. Right? And as this thing opened in front of my eyes from the side, and I'm looking at that dough and the nooks and crannies, I said to myself, wow! If there was something inside here, that would be great. And that's truly how stuffed crust pizza was born.

Now, to answer your question, what was my concept? What was my real stuffed crust pizza going to be like? Well, I grew up in the streets of Brooklyn, and growing up in the streets of Brooklyn, there was pizzerias on every corner. There was no Pizza Hut or Domino's or Little Caesars in Brooklyn. They could never make it. So the pizzerias that I went into sold pizza by the slice. So I said, well, what else do they sell? They sell sausage rolls and they sell meatball rolls and chicken parm rolls and broccoli and cheese rolls. And I said, wow, what if we put those fillings in a smaller amount in the crust of the pizza? And then when someone's done eating the pizza, they're gonna have a calzone, or they're going to have a sausage roll or whatever it is, I even made stuffed crust pizza with apple pie in the filling. So when you were done eating a slice of pizza, you had dessert. You know what? That's what stuffed crust pizza was truly designed to be. Two products in one.

Now remember this. I grew up in the streets of Brooklyn and pizza was sold by the slice. So my audience, my demographics to sell this,

was that pizzeria guy, came from Italy, who looked at me and said, Anthony, what are you, crazy? I don't give you \$1. Get out of my pizzeria. I no pay you.

**Jeremy:** Okay. The local guys kick Anthony out, but Anthony has a patent on his method, so he decides to try his luck with big pizza.

**Anthony:** Where did Pizza Hut ask me to send the product and my concept and my patent? To their R&D department, research and development. And I said to myself, even as a very young man, you want me to send my patent to the people that you hire to come up with new items for you? Does that really make sense? And then miraculously, miraculously, after 1991, when I sent it to them again, Patty Scheibmeir that worked in Pizza Hut's R&D department lays claim to creating stuffed crust pizza for Pizza Hut. Is that not sad? That's pretty sad to me.

**Jeremy:** It is. It is very sad. It is very sad. I have one final question. Italian American food is not Italian food. It's more of everything. It's, you know, it's not pasta with a little sugo. It's pasta with meatballs or whatever. Is there a sense in which stuffed crust pizza is more of everything?

**Anthony:** It is more of everything. Pizza has been around forever and not many people have been able to change the way pizza was made until stuffed crust pizza. And it is Americanised in a way. And what we all do is we try to take concepts and ideas that sell well, like pizza, and try and make them better. So it is more, it's more of what's good. And we made it better.

Transcripts are possible thanks to the generosity of Eat This Podcast supporters. If you find the transcript useful, please [consider joining them](#).