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Required Eating

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Introduction

Food is one of the few languages everyone speaks, yet it has countless dialects. *Required Eating* is a guided tour through those dialects—twenty-five emblematic dishes and cuisines that reveal how people nourish themselves, celebrate, and tell stories without words. This is not a list of the “best” foods, because taste resists leaderboards. Instead, it is a considered playlist: a set of dishes that illuminate technique, history, place, and the everyday genius of cooks around the world.

Each chapter focuses on a single dish or, in a few cases, a tightly defined culinary tradition. We’ll explore how a food came to be, why it matters, and what makes a definitive version sing. You’ll learn the core techniques that give each dish its voice—whether that’s the disciplined heat management of Texas brisket, the knife work and rice science of Edomae sushi, or the spice-layering that lifts a Hyderabadi biryani. Along the way, we’ll meet the people and places that keep these traditions alive, from market stalls and home kitchens to humble lunch counters and white-tablecloth rooms.

This book is also an invitation to eat with context. Dishes don’t float above culture; they are rooted in trade routes, migrations, inventions, and constraints. A bowl of pho carries echoes of colonial histories and street-side ingenuity. Jollof rice compresses a West African conversation about pride, rivalry, and celebration into a single pot. Even a deceptively simple food like fish and chips bears witness to technological change, urban life, and the comfort of a warm paper parcel on a cold night.

You’ll find practical guidance, too. When a dish is best sought out rather than cooked at home, I’ll point you to the kinds of places that do it justice and what to look for when you get there. When home cooking makes sense, you’ll get a cook’s-eye view: essential ingredients, smart substitutions, and technique notes that respect tradition while recognizing modern kitchens and varied access. Dietary needs matter; where appropriate, I’ll offer thoughtful adaptations that preserve a dish’s spirit without pretending that every change leaves it unchanged.

Respect is a recurring theme. Culinary traditions aren’t museum pieces, but they aren’t open-source software either. Credit matters: to the communities that created these dishes, to the farmers and fishers who supply them, and to the cooks who refine them daily. As you try new foods, consider the ethics of sourcing, seasonality, and sustainability. Eating well is inseparable from eating responsibly.

Finally, *Required Eating* is meant to spark curiosity more than completionism. If a chapter sends you to a neighborhood you’ve never visited, a festival you’ve never

attended, or a technique you've never tried, it has done its job. Let this list be a beginning, not an ending. There will always be more to taste, more to learn, and more to share at the table. May these pages help you travel widely, even when you're close to home, and find the dishes that become your own required eating.

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CHAPTER ONE: Neapolitan Pizza: The Soul of Naples

To truly understand pizza, you must go to Naples. This vibrant, sometimes chaotic, city in southern Italy is not just the birthplace of pizza; it is its spiritual homeland. Here, pizza is more than just food; it's an identity, a way of life, and a culinary art form deeply woven into the city's history and culture. The streets hum with the scent of baking dough and simmering tomatoes, and in nearly every nook and cranny, you'll find a pizzeria serving authentic Neapolitan pizza.

The concept of topping flatbreads has existed since ancient times, with food historians tracing the roots of Neapolitan pizza back to focaccia-like meals eaten by ancient Romans. The word "pizza" itself appeared in texts as early as 997 AD in central and southern Italy. For centuries, this simple dish of bread with various toppings was a staple for the lower classes. However, the pizza we recognize today, with its defining characteristic of tomato sauce, truly began to evolve in Naples in the 18th century.

Before the 1700s, tomatoes were not a common pizza topping in Europe, largely because they were believed to be poisonous. Originating in Peru, these "poisonous" fruits were brought to Europe in the 16th century by explorers. It wasn't until the late 18th century that the poor peasants and mariners of Naples began to top their flatbreads with tomatoes, quickly making the dish popular among locals and visitors alike. This integration of the tomato was a pivotal moment, leading to the creation of the modern pizza.

The most famous legend surrounding Neapolitan pizza centers on the Pizza Margherita. In 1889, King Umberto I and Queen Margherita of Savoy visited Naples. Seeking to sample local fare, the queen was presented with a pizza created by pizzaiolo Raffaele Esposito. This patriotic pizza, topped with fresh tomatoes (red), mozzarella (white), and basil (green), mirrored the colors of the recently unified Italian flag. The queen reportedly adored it, and thus, the Pizza Margherita was named in her honor, solidifying its place as a culinary icon and a symbol of Italian pride. While this is the most popular tale, some historians note that pizzas with basil, tomatoes, and mozzarella arranged in a flower shape existed before 1889, with "margherita" translating to "daisy." Regardless of its exact origin, the Margherita pizza became the quintessential Neapolitan pizza.

Beyond the Margherita, another classic Neapolitan pizza is the Pizza Marinara. This older, cheeseless version is topped with tomato sauce, garlic, oregano, and olive oil. It earned its name from "la marinara," the seafarer's wife, who traditionally prepared it for her husband upon his return from fishing in the Bay of Naples. Both Margherita and Marinara remain Naples' classic pizzas, even as countless other toppings and

variations have emerged globally.

The precise standards and traditional methods for Neapolitan pizza are rigorously protected. The Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana (AVPN), founded in Naples in 1984 by a group of the city's oldest pizza-making families, works to preserve and promote the authentic Neapolitan pizza. This organization sets strict guidelines for what can officially be called a "Neapolitan pizza" and even offers certification for pizzerias and pizzaiolos (pizza makers) who adhere to these traditions. The art of making Neapolitan pizza is so culturally significant that it has been recognized by UNESCO and included on its list of intangible cultural heritage.

So, what exactly defines an authentic Neapolitan pizza? It begins with the dough, made from just four simple ingredients: highly refined Italian "00" or "0" wheat flour, water, salt, and yeast. No oil or sugar is traditionally added to the dough. The dough is kneaded by hand or with a low-speed mixer and, crucially, formed by hand without a rolling pin. This hand-stretching technique, which avoids pressing out the air bubbles, is essential for creating the signature puffy, airy crust, known as the *cornicione*. The dough undergoes a slow fermentation process, typically for 8-24 hours, to develop its distinct flavor and texture.

The toppings, while minimal, are of paramount importance and must be of the highest quality. For the tomato sauce, authentic Neapolitan pizza requires either San Marzano tomatoes or Pomodorino del Piennolo del Vesuvio. San Marzano tomatoes, an heirloom plum variety, are prized for their sweetness, low acidity, and meaty texture, which prevents the pizza from becoming soggy during baking. These tomatoes are often hand-crushed or lightly chopped and spread directly onto the dough, with the understanding that the sauce will cook in the intense heat of the oven, fusing flavors into a perfect balance.

The cheese traditionally used is fresh *mozzarella di bufala Campana*, made from the milk of Mediterranean water buffalo, or *fior di latte*, which is cow's milk mozzarella. Mozzarella di bufala is known for its creamy texture and mild flavor. To prevent excess moisture from making the pizza soupy, the mozzarella is often cut into strips and allowed to drain for several hours before being placed on the pizza. Fresh basil leaves and a drizzle of high-quality extra virgin olive oil complete the traditional topping ensemble.

The cooking method is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Neapolitan pizza. It must be baked in a wood-fired oven at extremely high temperatures, typically ranging from 800-900°F (427-482°C), or even higher. This intense heat cooks the pizza incredibly quickly, usually within 60 to 120 seconds. The rapid baking time is crucial for achieving the characteristic crust: a thin, soft, and slightly wet center surrounded by the puffy, leopard-spotted *cornicione*. The extreme heat causes the dough to lift and blister, creating a delightful contrast of textures. Unlike some crispier American-

style pizzas, authentic Neapolitan pizza is intentionally soft and foldable, a texture Italians sometimes describe as "al fazzoletto," or "like a handkerchief."

The size of a Neapolitan pizza is also specific, typically an individual 10-12 inch pie, weighing between 200-280g of dough. The cooked crust should be about an inch thick, with a much thinner center. While the ideal Neapolitan pizza experience usually involves a traditional wood-fired oven, home cooks can achieve a delicious Neapolitan-style pizza by preheating a pizza steel or stone in a conventional oven at its highest temperature, sometimes utilizing methods like baking on the bottom rack and then broiling for char.

In Naples, pizzerias are not just restaurants; they are institutions, often passed down through generations. Antica Pizzeria Port'Alba, which began as a street vendor in 1738 and became a permanent establishment in 1830, claims to be the oldest pizzeria in the world. Other legendary pizzerias include L'Antica Pizzeria da Michele, founded in 1870, known for its strict adherence to tradition by serving only Margherita and Marinara pizzas. Gino e Toto Sorbillo, Pizzeria Starita a Materdei, and Antica Pizzeria Di Matteo are also highly regarded, each with their own history and loyal following. These establishments exemplify the passion and dedication of Neapolitan pizzaiolos, many of whom are like pop stars in the city, revered for their craft.

The charm of Neapolitan pizza lies in its beautiful simplicity. With just a few high-quality ingredients and a masterful technique, it transforms humble elements into an extraordinary culinary experience. It's a testament to how tradition, place, and the everyday genius of cooks can create something universally loved and deeply rooted in culture. To eat Neapolitan pizza is not just to consume food; it is to participate in a centuries-old ritual, a taste of Naples itself.

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