

GUEST COLUMNIST *CMN Exclusive!*

Perspective: Pizza Cheese

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Smarter cheese strategies help pizza operators protect margins

Heading into the 2026 International Pizza Expo & Conference this week, pizza operators are focused on solving a familiar challenge: how to stay profitable while continuing to deliver value to guests.

Operators today are managing rising labor costs, higher rent and utilities, delivery platform fees and ongoing supply chain volatility. At the same time, consumers remain price sensitive after several years of inflation.

Bill Oakley, show director of the International Pizza Expo, shared, "Today's pizzeria operators must continue to innovate to meet consumers where they are; whether it's embracing regional styles of pizza or addressing evolving dietary preferences, operators are constantly adapting while managing the realities of running a restaurant business."

One of the biggest levers in that equation is cheese. For many pizzerias, cheese is one of the major ingredient expenses, making it one of the most closely managed items in the back of the house. Like other dairy products, cheese prices fluctuate due to production costs, labor shortages, weather conditions and shifts

in global demand.

Because of the volume of cheese used and its cost, even small changes in usage can impact margins. Rather than simply reducing cheese and the consumer experience, operators are becoming more strategic about how they use it across menu categories.

At the same time, pizza restaurants are expanding their product offerings. Many now serve sandwiches, pasta, salads, bowls and appetizers alongside pizza, pushing chefs to think carefully about cross utilization and how ingredients can work across multiple dishes. Using the same cheeses across multiple menu items, from pizza toppings to pasta finishes, helps operators stretch purchasing power while maintaining menu cohesion.

Operators are also focused on reducing waste and maximizing yield. Even parts of the product that might once have been discarded, like the cheese rinds, are finding new life in sauces, soups and broths.

Consumer behavior is shifting as well. Greater portion awareness, increased protein consumption and the rise of

GLP-1 weight loss medications are influencing how some consumers approach indulgent foods like pizza. Foodservice research firm Technomic estimates that 11% of foodservice consumers have tried or are currently on a GLP-1 medication. Rather than eliminating indulgence, many consumers are opting for smaller portions and seeking out higher-quality ingredients. This shift reinforces the need for smarter ingredient strategies. For many operators today, managing cheese isn't about using less — it's about using it more strategically.

• How operators are responding to changing eating habits

Some of the ways operators are responding to changing eating habits include:

- Adapting to portion trends — With some consumers gravitating toward smaller portions and a focus on increasing their protein intake, operators are now strategically expanding their portion sizes. This includes smaller pizzas, shareable formats or menus that balance indulgence with more plant-forward items where cheese and dairy provide the main source of protein.

- Balancing protein and cost — Protein continues to drive demand, but meat prices remain volatile. Operators are balancing premium meats with vegetables and high-impact ingredients that also provide a natural source of protein like cheese to maintain protein-forward menus while controlling costs.

• Operator tips for boosting protein

Following are some operator tips for boosting protein with California cheese and dairy:

- Add crunchy cheese "croutons" made from baked or fried Paneer or Halloumi to soups, salads or bowls;

- Add grated cheese or cottage cheese to ground meat mixtures for meatballs or meatloaf to maintain protein while reducing meat usage;

- Replace a portion of water in baked goods with farmer's cheese or yogurt to

increase protein;

- Marinate Feta or fresh cheeses with lemon zest, olive oil and Aleppo pepper for salads or pasta dishes; and

- Thicken soups and stews with pureed cottage cheese.

• Cheese strategies

Additional cheese strategies being used by operators include:

- Blending for flavor and cost control — Many operators blend Mozzarella with smaller amounts of higher-impact cheeses like Monterey Jack, a California original, aged California Cheddar, Provolone, Fontina-style or smoked Mozzarella. A small portion of these specialty cheeses can add significant flavor, allowing operators to reduce overall cheese usage while elevating the dish.

- Layering instead of adding volume — Rather than piling on more cheese, operators are layering varieties to build flavor. Mozzarella provides melt and stretch, mid-layer cheeses like Provolone add depth and finishing cheeses like California Dry Jack deliver a final punch of flavor.

- Using cheese across the menu — The same cheeses can serve multiple functions as pizza toppings, melted in sandwiches, used on top of salads or as finishing cheeses for pasta. This allows operators to manage SKUs and simplify purchasing.

- Whole-product utilization — Using the entire cheese wheel helps reduce waste. Cheese rinds can be simmered into soups, sauces and broths, extracting additional flavor from a product that might otherwise be discarded.

See it in action! Visit the California Milk Advisory Board booth (#1582) at the International Pizza Expo to explore strategies you can bring directly to your partners and customers. **CMN**

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NEWS / BUSINESS

Multistate outbreak investigation linked to Raw Farm Cheddar; company refuses recall

FRESNO, Calif. — FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in collaboration with state and local partners, are investigating a multistate outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7 infections.

As of March 14, a total of seven confirmed infections have been reported from three states, including California (5), Florida (1) and Texas (1). Known illness onset dates range from Sept. 1, 2025, to Feb. 13, 2026. Whole genome sequencing analysis of *E. coli* isolates from ill people shows that they all are closely related genetically to each other. This means that people in this outbreak are likely to share a common source of infection. Additionally, four of seven

cases are 3 years old or younger. Two patients have been hospitalized. No deaths or hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) cases have been reported.

State and local public health officials have interviewed three ill people about food exposures of interest in this outbreak. All three people reported eating Raw Farm-brand raw Cheddar. State and local officials are working to gather additional data for the four other illnesses, including two illnesses that occurred in 2025. Epidemiologic evidence indicates that Raw Farm-brand raw Cheddar cheese products made by Raw Farm LLC likely are the source of this outbreak.

FDA has recommended that Raw

Farm LLC voluntarily remove their raw cheese products from the market, and the firm has declined.

Raw Farm, based in Fresno, California, has posted on its social media channels that it disagrees with the allegations that its products are possibly linked to this outbreak.

"We disagree 100% with FDA's false 'possible link' and extreme allegations," the company says, stating that all of its products have been confirmed to be negative for all harmful bacteria, including *E. coli*, and that FDA has found no raw farm products that have tested positive for *E. coli* in the marketplace.

"CDFA (California Department of Food and Agriculture) and the state of

California are not taking any action," Raw Farm adds. "FDA and CDC linking our brand to an outbreak is egregious and extreme harassment towards our brand."

The investigation is ongoing to determine the source of contamination and whether additional products are linked to illnesses. To date, to FDA's awareness, no Raw Farm-brand Cheddar products from this time period have tested positive for *E. coli*. As part of this investigation, state partners initiated collection of product samples for testing and analysis, but results are not yet available. FDA will update this advisory should additional information become available. **CMN**