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| |  | | --- | | **If restaurateurs are romantics at heart, pizza restaurateurs have got to be the proverbial Don Juans of the industry. For proof, look no further than any restaurant industry reporter’s email inbox in the run-up to Valentine’s Day where you will find a deluge of urgent notices asserting the values of one pizza brand’s heart-shaped pies over all the others.**  **Yes, it is the season of love at the pizzeria where operators know that the key to their patrons’ hearts is also a heart. And in most cases, those heart-shaped pies are heavily laden with pepperoni discs lined up like tiny mouths whispering sweet nothings in diners’ ears (try and get that image out of your head now).**  **So yes, this report will round up a smattering of the heart-shaped pie specials that have crossed the Pizza Marketplace news desk recently. But it will also set the stage for all this dough-encrusted devotion by relaying some of the facts around pizza during the pandemic and how it has affected pizzeria sales and operation. And that begins with the fact that operators need to heed the idea that Valentine’s Day itself is morphing a bit.**  **Hey, not everybody’s hitched, ya’ know!**  We don’t mean to harsh the romantic buzz of Valentine’s Day, but recent findings by consumer data transparency platform, Invisibly, did make two things plain about this year’s Feb. 14 folderol:   1. Not everyone will celebrate couple-dom Sunday thanks to recently inaugurated simultaneous celebrations of both, Galentine’s (paying homage to female friendship on Feb. 13) and Singles Awareness Day (a Feb. 15 occasion that recognizes the joys of single-dom). 2. Even couples admit COVID has put a crimp in Cupid’s arrow.   According to information accumulated through Invisibly’s RealTime research tool nearly half (47%) of consumers surveyed said the pandemic has impacted their Valentine’s plan. Of that bunch, Baby Boomers were found most likely to disregard all those COVID-19 restrictions and go out to eat anyway on Valentine’s Day – more than any other generation. The youngsters of the generational divides in Gen Z and the millennial mob, were actually “much more interested” in paying attention to Singles Awareness Day than Boomers or Gen X.  But the data also found that there’s a general lack of love-iness across all age groups, with 40% claiming they won’t celebrate Valentine’s, Galentine’s or Singles Awareness Days this year (Take that pandemic!) Invisibly’s data found that only about 24% were planning to celebrate, either by going out (13%) or staying in (11%). And of those, a small percentage said the only steaming-up they’d be doing on the Day of Love would be on their phone or computer monitors. That group planned to have their Valentines Day dates virtually.  Other than that, the research showed that of those celebrating anything on Sunday, the largest share were still paying tribute to Valentine’s Day. But about half that many – 18% -- were planning to celebrate Singles Awareness Day, while 5% were all about Galentine’s Day.  For pizza restaurateurs, these trends are worth noting and keeping in mind as Valentine’s Day specials and meal kits are planned and promoted. Celebrations like Single Awareness Day and Galentine’s Day might even provide whole new sectors of promotional territory to harvest.  And speaking of meal kits …  On a sheltered-in-place pandemic-stricken planet, special occasions like Valentine’s Day demand an in-house answer or two. In fact, research firm, GlobalData, recently said it expects a virtual “explosion of interest” in romantic meal kits as people seek to create intimate, restaurant-quality dinners at home. The company’s most recent U.K.-based research found that 24% of consumers planned increased take-out meal purchases than they did pre-pandemic.  “Throughout 2020, we saw a significant shift towards people recreating out-of-home experiences within the home,” GlobalData Consumer Analyst Ryan Whittaker, said in a news release about the findings. “Several people made bars in their gardens in the summer, Diageo reported a boost to its spirits sales as people made cocktails at home. And the end of 2020 saw demand for full Christmas meal kits skyrocket. As U.K. consumers in 2021 are still unable to visit their favorite restaurants, we expect many will buy the next best thing – Valentine’s meal kits to recreate at home.”  The company also said that demand for booze to the in-home consumer is also pegging the gauge, with increased demand for everything from gin to ready-to-drink cocktails.  “Many of the RTD and pre-mixed alcoholic cocktail brands, as well as home delivery from local bars, facilitate experiences in the home, providing convenient emulations of the going-out experience and moments of excitement and indulgence,” Whitaker said.  “The changes in demand for more at-home experiential fare should be embraced by foodservice providers. The desire for novelty extends as much to meal kits and takeaways as it does cocktails; people like to engage with brands that make their at-home experience better, more exciting or funny. Restaurants, pubs and bars still have a golden opportunity to capture at-home consumption share from supermarkets and other retailers by offering something the supermarkets cannot. In-speriences will be a solid investment until the end of lockdowns and likely beyond. Innovating at-home experiences will provide a much-needed boost to local pubs and restaurants, which will be vital for their survival in 2021.  And lastly comes so very pizza-focused fun facts from a December survey by independent pizza ------- platform, Slice, and its 14,000 pizzeria members. Slice’s insights give pizza operators an idea of what to offer that Val-/Galentine and Singles Awareness customer on their big days over the coming weekend. For instance, it found that many more pizzerias are finding love in the afternoon, with Slice’s shops showing a 39% boost in lunch deals to capture all those at-home workers. Other findings, include: | |

106% growth in vegan pizza orders.

Most popular appetizer: mozzarella sticks.

Top toppings were all pepperoni, with either (No. 1) extra cheese, (No. 2) mushrooms or (No. 3) sausage.

Now that our restaurant readers have been thoroughly educated on the latest trends in the “ways of the ‘za” before the roll-out of the weekend’s special occasions, here are just some of the brands with specials over the next few days:

Donatos: Create-your-own thin-crust heart-shaped pies through Feb. 14, also un-cut as further proof that pizza operators are just a bunch of softies. Or as Donatos President and CEO Tom Krouse, puts it "With all the challenges people have faced over the past year, we think this is a great way to bring a smile to someone's face and make their day a little better."

Fresh Brothers: Heart-shaped pies are available all of February.

#### Hungry Howie’s: This big value for a big sloppy pizza-fied heart offers a one-topping pies for $6.99 Feb. 13-14.



Mountain Mike’s: Heart-shaped pies are available here through Month’s end, which as President and COO Jim Metevier said are or are at least fast-coming the standard in Feburary romance.

“We knew we had to bring back our heart shaped pizza when Valentine’s Day 2020 was our third busiest day of the year ,” Metevier said in a press release about the specials. “Our fans had a lot of fun last February sharing the love with our heart shaped pizzas, and with things looking so different this year, we’re really hoping these pizzas can bring some extra joy to our guests. Nothing says ‘I love you’ more than a Mountain Mike’s heart shaped pizza, so let’s keep the love fest going all month long!”

[Papa Gino’s](https://www.papaginos.com/): Heart-shaped pies through Feb. 14. All served uncut (to avoid broken hearts) as well as merch like T-shirts with funky “love at first bite” Valentine’s Day-themed phrases.

Papa John’s: This Louisville, Kentucky-based mega-brand is going all value on Valentine’s Day with $11 heart-shaped pies as listed on its website.

Pieology: Sweetheart bundle deal on signature pies and cookies Feb. 13-15 giving any who order a pair of signature pies and two cookies for $22 discount eligibility, or for singles, one signature pie and one cookie for $11.

[Pizza Guys](https://www.pizzaguys.com/): This Sacramento-based brand will also sell the hot heart commodities with a single topping throughout the month of February at either $14.99 or $15.99 each, depending on location.

#### PIZZA HUT: Heart-shaped pies began going out the door earlier this week for an average price of $11.99, though prices vary by store.