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awareness

CUIT
RED TAPE,
CUI

TWO (meats) OUT OF THREE *ain't bad*



PRODUCT

Rao's Brick Oven
Crust Meat Trio Pizza

PRICE

\$10.99/20.8 oz. pizza

PLUS

Crust, cheese,
pepperoni all pleased
the palate

PROBLEM

Bacon often failed to
register; sauce failed
to live up to brand's
quality

Underwhelming bacon and sauce hold back Rao's latest product.

Since Rao's started selling its homemade Italian sauce served in its legendary East Harlem restaurant in the early 1990s, the brand has continuously expanded the breadth of its retail line, from sauces to dry pasta, soups, ketchup and frozen entrées — including frozen brick oven pizzas. We spotted Rao's brick oven crust meat trio pizza recently, and knew it was something we had to share with our group of keen eaters.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Our evaluators were ages 12 and older. Although many frequently order pizza from local pizzerias, all generally keep frozen pizza on hand.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

At first glance, a few taste-testers were confused by the packaging and graphics. "I didn't realize it was a three-meat pizza until I took a bite," one said. "I thought it was only pepperoni based on the picture." Another needed more explanation about the crust: "'Brick oven crust.' What does that mean?" A third wondered, "I thought Rao's whole thing is their sauce. Wouldn't that be more important than the meat?"

Others felt drawn in by the package and messaging. "We all liked that the packaging graphics were like the sauce packaging," one tester said. "There was great excitement from our friends who are giant fans of Rao's Sauce about what this pizza would be like. They love the brand."

Some other samplers felt let down once they opened the package. "I thought the pizza was a bit small. Wasn't sure it would fill me up," one wrote. Another noted, "Our pie wasn't as 'loaded' with the three meats as the front of the package."

TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

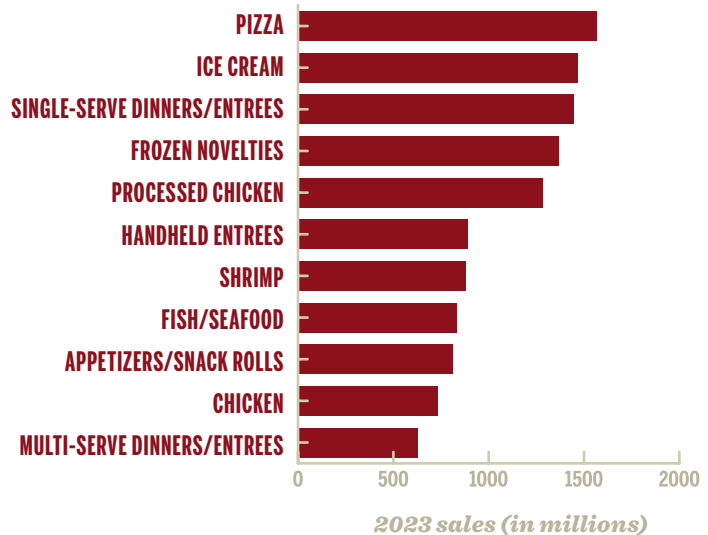
Upon diving in, several commenters complained about the quantity or quality of the bacon. "I wouldn't have known it was on there," one tester said. "I saw a little piece of bacon that fell off that was a little dry and it tasted exactly like Bac-os," opined another. "Not something I associate with quality meat."

A couple others suggested dropping the bacon altogether. "I didn't think the bacon was necessary, as the other ingredients were a perfect combo," one tester said. And another said they could only taste the bacon when they ate it sepa-

Industry LEADER

Pizza is a comfortable No. 1 in the frozen food market, with more than \$1.56 billion in sales in 2023 alone. Not even ice cream, at \$1.46 billion, can match pizza's market share.

Frozen & Refrigerated Buyer; Circana



rately. “Why bother?” they said. “Give me a few more pieces of sausage. Is it just for the sake of being able to call it a ‘trio’?”

Complaints about other aspects included: “The pepperoni got pretty charred on the edges,” “Not as much mozzarella as shown,” and perhaps most concerning from a brand equity standpoint, “We were looking forward to the taste of Rao’s Sauce, and thought the sauce was insufficient.”

One taster and their family did not like much of anything. “We all thought the pizza flavor was taken over by the meat flavoring,” they wrote. “The pepperoni

was dried out, and we didn’t like the sausage—it tasted chewy and fake—and the bacon was so strong.”

A few other tasters mostly liked the pizza, aside from the lack of bacon. “The pepperoni was high quality and not greasy; the sausage was high quality and had a good balance of flavor,” one wrote. Another said, “The sausage was moist, flavorful, and ample; not hard or gristly. The pepperoni was nice and crisp. ... Great pull to the cheese!”

Several others were more uniformly positive. A couple particularly enjoyed the crust. “The crust was very good, very crunchy,” one tester wrote.

A few others lauded the meats. “The size of the sausage pieces makes it seem like a high-quality sausage,” one tester said. Another opined: “The meats were delicious, with the crispy pepperoni being our favorite.”

Lastly, a couple commenters praised the Rao’s meat trio across the board: “The cheese, sauce and crust were full of flavor and the perfect amount,” one wrote.

UPSHOT

In the end, several tasters said they might buy other Rao products, but not this one. “The Rao’s sauce and crust was good and crisp, so we would try again in a plain or

margherita pizza, but would never buy the meat trio pizza. Too much flavor,” wrote one. And a third commented that they love Rao’s sauces and other products, “so I was shocked that I wasn’t even impressed with the sauce. I won’t be buying again unless they introduce a thin-crust version.”

Others said they would buy the meat trio again, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm. “It’s not like ordering a pizza from my local pizzeria, but it’s good to have on-hand,” one taster wrote.

Another commenter put the price in a broader context: “A high-quality pizza fit-

ting with the imagery of Rao’s. It’s slightly more expensive than typical frozen pizzas, but significantly less expensive than pie shop pizzas.” And one taster saw the meat trio as entertaining-worthy, saying, “Could serve this with friends and, since it had two of the three meats of good quality, and the crust was crunchy, it would not be embarrassing.”

Lastly, a few tasters gushed over the Rao’s SKU, with comments like: “Overall, we enjoyed this and would definitely have again,” “Often, frozen crusts go uneaten here, but not with this one!” and “I gave it rave reviews.”

TASTE *test*

CONCLUSION

According to a study conducted by OnePoll for Amazon Fresh, our nation's 'perfect' pizza is generally: circular (65%), thick crust (32%), features tomato sauce (61%), topped with mozzarella (59%), pepperoni (51%), sausage (42%),

mushrooms (37%) and parmesan (37%).

Based on that data and our tasters' comments, Rao's did a great job, but could easily have introduced a "meat duo" pizza and many would have been content. The bacon seems like an add-on that didn't bring much

added value, especially considering many did not know it was there until probed.

However, Rao's made and continues to make its mark due to its sauce, and some of the comments raise questions about whether the pizza design was meant to

be disconnected from the brand value of the sauce. For at least some fans of Rao's sauce, there is a gap in quality.

Nevertheless, Rao's pizza offers high-quality ingredients in a convenient format with some real textural diversity. We

foresee many people purchasing Rao's pizza — although perhaps not this specific variety — to keep on-hand for a snack or easy pizza dinner. But unless it's upgraded, some will continue to be disappointed with the sauce that is Rao's heritage.

by **Jacqueline Beckley, The Understanding & Insight Group, and Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration LLC**

Food product development and consumer research veterans, Jacqueline Beckley, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join Meatingplace Magazine as regular contributors to MeatingTaste, a consumer sampling of new products featured in our monthly Taste Test column. Here's how the program works: The meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own houses. No instructions are provided to the consumer, other than to write their overall impressions of the product, as well as to evaluate the flavor, texture, packaging and ease of use. Beckley, Cesario and Vahalik look for common threads by using Getting It!®, a system developed to listen to consumers about products. The sample of people is not intended to be a 'taste test' in a controlled setting, nor is it intended to simulate a focus group. Others are doing both. Rather, the intent is to interpret the response of the people who might purchase a product like this and use it, simply based on their encounters with the product in their individual, unique home environment. That is how U&I has been developing cutting-edge product and people understanding since 1999.


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