**DIY Pizza Night**

Warm, fresh out of the oven pizza. A tried and true comfort food, great for that picnic at the park, your next Friday movie night in, or to serve the masses at a social gathering. Unfortunately as tasty as it is, pizza is often not the most healthy option when store bought or delivered. Let's put a healthier spin on pizza night and have some fun doing it! Instead of calling up the local pizza joint or hitting the grocer for a take 'n' bake pie, try making your own hot and delicious pizza at home. Invite the kids into the kitchen to play "chef" and watch as they proudly create their own personal pizza to enjoy! Not sure where to start? We've got you covered with a list of pizza tips, ingredients and a few healthy swap suggestions so you can focus on the fun - creating your own pizza masterpiece!

**Pizza making tips:**

**Tip #1:** choose your crust. From thin to thick, whole grain to gluten free, visit your local grocer's fresh food or freezer section and you will find you have quite a variety of crust options to choose from!

**Tip #2:** choose your sauce. No you don't need that jar labeled "pizza sauce" sitting there in the grocery aisle....get creative and use your favorite pasta sauce such as marinara, tomato basil, vodka or even just a basic tomato (you can always add your own herbs and spices!). Not a fan of red sauces? Try a creamy alternative such as Alfredo, pesto or butter cream sauce. Looking to keep your pie on the lighter side? Pureed veggies make a great sauce layer (such as a squash varietal) or opt for olive oil mixed with a few fresh herbs brushed across the crust. Want a bit of unconventional flair? Spread your favorite hummus or BBQ sauce to add some zest to your pie!

**Tip #3:** portion out some topping options. I love using small to medium size ramekin bowls to set out a few favorite toppings as it allows everyone to see their choices up front and think of a tasty combination or theme for their pizza - Meat lovers? Veggie lovers? Hawaiian? Fruiti Tuiti? Sweet, Savory or Spice? Having toppings laid out ahead of time is also a simple way to support balance and healthy portion control, vs. dumping cheese onto your pie crust straight out of the bag for example.

**Tip #4:**thin and crispy or thick and doughy? For a crispier thin crust try baking your pizza right on the center rack of your oven (or use a pizza baking pan that features holes for good airflow). For a thicker, more doughy crust, bake your crust on a traditional baking sheet with a bit of olive oil brushed along the outer exposed crust edges.

**Building the perfect pie!**

**Crust:** a thin crust is great for saving on empty calories while still delivering flavor. If you are feeling adventurous check out Pinterest for some easy to make doughs. When shopping at your local grocer choose from fresh or frozen pre made doughs and even crusts - gluten free, thin, thick, organic, whole wheat and more! Aim for low sodium and low sugar dough options and preferably whole grains to better support nutrition goals.

**Sauces:** sauce options are pretty endless! From reds to creams to herbs and purees to your favorite spreads you can really choose the flavor that suits you and your topping strategy best!

**Herbs & Spices:** herbs, spices and seasonings are a great way to add flavor without packing on empty calories. Not sure where to start? Some classics are garlic, rosemary, oregano, thyme, basil, marjoram, cinnamon, red pepper flake, black and/or white peppers.

**Lean Meats:**opt for lean, low fat and low sodium options whenever possible. Sliced chicken breast, ground turkey or chicken and seafood options all make great pizza toppers. Pepperonis and bacons are of course quite tasty, but many add loads of sodium too, so when opting for these just proceed with caution. Vegetarian? Try using tofu or beans for some protein power.

**Cheese:**variety is king here - from mild to bold and rich and gooey to light and flavorful there is a cheese (or two) for everyone! Using low fat and low sodium options will save you on empty calories and still deliver all the flavor. Some pizza favorites are mozzarella, romano and parmesan, but why not punch up the flavor with a nice feta, pepper jack, gouda or even cream cheese? Can't decide? Try a finely grated cheese blend for multiple flavors.

**Veggies:** what a great way to boost your nutrient values! With so many to choose from you are sure to find at least a few you can enjoy! Spinach, arugula, kale, red, yellow, orange and green peppers, mushrooms, broccoli, zucchini, eggplant, squash, pumpkin, sweet potatoes, carrots, red or white onions, artichokes and more! Really...are there any off limits?!

**Fruits:** and we mean more than just pineapple! Sliced pear, strawberries, apples, fig or mango are all quite tasty. I have seen some pretty beautiful pizzas adorned with fruit, talk about adding the wow factor! As a general rule of thumb, if you can grill it, you can probably slice it and bake on a pizza too!

**Take away -** mix, match and play with flavor. The more you explore, the more amazing delectable pizzas you might find!

**Eat and Enjoy!**