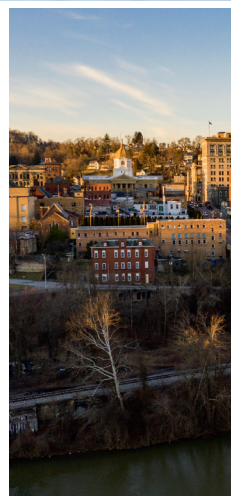


Rocks and Rolls

Words: **Caroline Eubanks**

The traditional pepperoni roll is simply bread and pepperoni, but some add mozzarella, provolone, peppers, or even marinara sauce.



DID YOU KNOW?

The pepperoni roll's origins are similar to the Cornish pasty. Miners needed these handheld snacks to eat while underground. They were filled with whatever was on hand – in this case, pepperoni.

A snack created by Italian immigrants, working in the mining industry, has become emblematic of West Virginia's culinary heritage. Meet the pepperoni roll.

The legacies of West Virginia and coal mining are impossible to disentangle, dating back over 250 years since coal was first discovered here. It's this industry, which supported the state's economy for generations, that was responsible for the state's most famous dish: the pepperoni roll.

It all started with the arrival of Italian immigrants to the mineral-rich mountains of northern West Virginia. A man named Giuseppe Argiro, a native of Calabria in southern Italy, had immigrated to find work in the mines and later opened Country Club Bakery in Fairmont.

"The coal miners would take a loaf of bread and stick of pepperoni into the mines," says John Menas of Colasessano's Pizza in Fairmont, West Virginia, where one of the versions of the pepperoni roll later sprang up. "[In 1927, Argiro] decided to just bake the pepperoni in the bread. And they just wrapped that up and took it in the mines with them for their lunch."

This allowed miners to eat using only one hand and enjoy a shelf-stable snack far beneath the Earth's surface.

You'll no longer find pepperoni rolls for 45 cents, the original price, but buying one won't set you back much more than five US dollars today. Marion County is considered to be the hub of all things pepperoni roll – even boasting an official Pepperoni Roll Trail – but you can find them in abundance anywhere around the state, not just in mining country.

Of course, Country Club Bakery in Fairmont was the first place to make them, and it remains in business to this day, with a historical marker in front of the store to commemorate its significance. Tomaro's Bakery in Clarksburg created a similar version around the same time and was also founded by Italian immigrants. The rolls have also gained popularity in small-town markets and at petrol stations. Each person you ask will have a different favourite.

Not all pepperoni rolls follow the traditional recipe from Country Club Bakery. Over the years, different establishments have added cheese, used sliced pepperoni instead of sticks, and even added sauce and other toppings.

At Colasessano's, the rolls have also been adapted from the original recipe. They are smaller, stuffed with sandwich pepperoni, and called 'pepperoni buns'.

"We slice the buns and put the sauce and the peppers inside them after the buns have already been baked and cooled. Then we re-bake them, so they come out nice and crunchy and hot," says Menas.

You're unlikely to find pepperoni rolls outside of West Virginia, but not for the reason you might think. It was rumoured for many years that it was illegal to sell them outside of their home state since the pepperoni wasn't cooked, but rather cured for preservation.

Whatever the truth is, you should fill up on pepperoni rolls whenever you get the chance, especially if your travels bring you to the Mountain State.

Clockwise from the top: The iconic pepperoni roll; Downtown Fairmont; Colasessano's menu; Clarksburg.

GETTING THERE The closest major airport is West Virginia International Yeager Airport in Charleston, around two hours from Fairmont, but you may have more flight options from Pittsburgh International Airport in neighbouring Pennsylvania, also a two-hour drive.

GETTING AROUND If you're interested in visiting multiple bakeries, it's best to have access to a car. Rentals are available at either of the aforementioned airports.

BEST TIME TO GO Autumn and spring provide the best weather for visitors, especially if you're looking to explore the outdoors, including New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, which is near Fayetteville.

FURTHER INFORMATION

wvtourism.com
marioncvb.com/wv-pepperoni-roll-trail
countryclubbakery.net
colasessanospizza.com
tomarobakery.com

Photos: Marion County CVB, Dreamstime