Tossers’ Shifts

Open:

tossers drift their car into the plaza – careful not to burn their tires on the parking lot’s asphalt like a slice left too long in the brick oven – a few minutes before they have to clock in. Tossers put on their flat-billed hat with a SUPREME patch on the front, and then shuffle past the beer garden where sparrows peck at last night’s crusts. When Tossers enter the store, the tang of dough hits their tongue through their nose. Tossers think about yeast activating: adding it to water wakes it up, and sprinkling a pinch of sugar gives it breakfast.

The sound system pushes out the morning music and Tossers say, “This is my jam.” Then Tossers swagger down the store’s floor. Tossers got on flour-coated sneakers that puff out white poofs with each step. Tossers’ legs groove and slide forward in a shuffled hopscotch over to the register where Counter Girls stand, already waiting. Counter Girls wrap their arms around Tossers as Tossers clock in. Owners work on prep, getting all the toppings, soups, and salads ready for the rest of the day.

Owners will do dough soon: cutting chunks of dough, weighing dough, wrapping dough, lining trays with dough, and filling the shelves of the walk-in freezer with dough. The thigh-sized corkscrew churns in the doughbowl. Tossers remember the story of one guy on the line – probably a Puller – who plunged his hand into the two-hundred-pound batch still finishing and pulled out an armful of dough and a hand minus the tip of a pinkie. That guy got twenty-five K, plus worker’s comp. Now, a cage covers the doughbowl and shuts off the machine when pulled up. Tossers snap their fingers.

Tossers head over to Managers’ closet-size office next to the bathrooms to snag a white apron. Managers tug on Tossers’ black shirt, shake their head, and say, “That’ll show the flour.” It’s a T-shirt that employees-of-the-month get; on the back there’s an outline of the state with a ring of text around it reading Florida * Local 407 * Pizza Union, and on the front there’s a screenshot of a pockmarked moon – Lazy Moon – over Tossers’ heart. It does show the flour. Tossers glance at the office clock and say, “Pies don’t toss themselves.”

“And the store doesn’t run itself,” Managers say, and then breathe out a sigh.

Tossers offer a fistbump. Managers meet it. Forgiven.

Tossers need to empty their minds and go toss. Tossers walk back into the store. Counter Girls wink at Tossers as they flip down stools from the bar seating.

Tossers tie on their aprons behind the assembly-line counter where all pizza starts as a pie tossed by them in their corner. Tossers try not to think about anything other than tossing, because they have to toss eleven pies by eleven. It’s 10 AM now.

During the hour, Tossers prep doughballs on the dough press, shape crusts on the floured counter, and then toss. Tossers jump-hop and then boomerang-throw the dough by flicking their fingers. Tossers land and then stand firm while the dough spins above them. Tossers catch the dough with their palm up and open.

In an ergonomic test, Tossers’ heart rates doubled just standing in their corner and then tripled while tossing. Tossers must toss and sauce and pull and cut one pie in less than four minutes. Each large-size doughball weighs three and one-half pounds. Tossers’ muscles are the definition of definition.

For good luck, Tossers kiss the tattoo of their kitty kats framed in an old timey portrait on their bicep, or lick the melting slice of pizza that was inked on their shoulder in Tokyo, or slap the octopus not-yet-colored-in on their forearm, or pat the totem fading on their calf as a gift for graduating high school back in Hawai’i.

Tossers hope for unicorns – perfect pies – but settle for football shapes even though Managers will say, “Gotta get eight whole slices out of that.”

The store opens at 11 AM and Tossers greet Customers, “Ahoy! Welcome aboard the good ship Lazy Moon,” even though there’s no nautical theme in the store.

Tossers say “Hey” to Toppers clocking in at 11:15 AM and only nod to Pullers who clock in at 11:30 AM.

Lunch Rush:

When Customers place an order, Counter Girls print out a ticket and if more than one Customer is on an order then Counter Girls write the same number on the corner of each ticket in the order and then circle the last ticket on the order.
A steel wire starts from a pole at the end of the pizza production line by the salad station and connects all the way down to another pole next to a mini-fridge that Toppers share with Tossers. Four carabiners hang on the wire. Clips thread through the carabiners. Counter Girls clip tickets onto the clips and sling the carabiners down the line: past Pullers setting up plates with silverware and pulling slices from the double-stacked ovens; past Toppers standing in front of a cutting board with a row of industrial stainless steel mini-fridges and sixteenth-pans of common toppings, eighth-pans of meats, a hotel pan full of shredded motz, eighth-pans of the most common vegetables, and all the way to Toppers’ shared mini-fridge with Tossers’ marinara sauce and the sprinkled-on toppings, stanky toppings: anchovies, blue cheese, capers (a.k.a. “peas’ rich cousin”), less used toppings: prosciutto (a.k.a “ham’s rich brother”), as well as breadsticks and breadbowls and pitas, and other sauces including ricotta and pesto and hummus; and the ticket on the clip slung on the carabiner stops just before the Tossers’ corner. Toppers snatch the tickets and sling the carabiners back down the wire. Toppers shove the tickets into a slot in a shelf in front of them, keeping tickets in order, and only moving them to Pullers’ station once the order is topped and put in the oven.

Tossers double-top with Toppers when tickets build up to fill the entire shelf and all four carabiners hang at the end of the line while Counter Girls call for clips to be slung back to clip on more tickets. Toppers stay planted. Tossers fill the line with topping backups and refill the shredded cheese from a tub in the walk-in freezer. Tossers bump Pullers from the line and Tossers pull slices and calzones and breadsticks and sliced-bread topped with motz from the ovens. Tossers remember starting as Pullers and running orders out to the floor, bussing tables, loading plates through the dish machine in the dish pit, and putting through a set of silverware in line after the plates, seemingly doing everything; but they didn’t yet realize that the store’s pulse comes from tossing.

When Counter Girls call out “ME-DE-UM” or “KAL-ZOWN,” Tossers peel off the plastic gloves they wear while topping. Tossers’ hand sweat mixed with the flour pastes the gloves to their skin. Tossers wash their hands at the handwashing station: soap (lathered to elbows) + water (warm) + scrubber (for fingernails and clumps of pasted-together arm hair) + Happy Birthday song (sung twice through) = clean hands. Tossers take medium doughballs from a fridge in their corner and press out the dough in the doughpress or hand press out a calzone doughball left out to rise at room temperature. Tossers toss mediums and calzones with razzmatazz – the dough sailing like a damp paper airplane. Tossers sauce and bake mediums. Tossers hand over calzones to Toppers, or just top it themselves. Tossers can, and do, do everything on the line.

Tossers say, “See y’all” to Customers leaving, full after lunch.

For first cut, Pullers check off shift change chores on a laminated paper:
- Bus all the plates, silverware, pint glasses from the tables (check)
- Run everything through the dish machine in the dish pit (check)
- Break down cardboard boxes from morning prep thrown out back by the dumpster (check)
- Restock all takeout shelves underneath the line and dry-good shelves in the back (check)

Pullers clock out.

Afternoon Lull:

Toppers check off second cut’s to-do list:
- Move mats (check)
- Scrape out and brush ovens (check)
- Sweep floors (check)
- Replace mats (check)
- Take out trash (check)

But Toppers stay on the line as Tossers make things not on the menu for their lunch: pitas stuffed with Greek salad and grilled chicken; tomato bisque in a breadbowl with cheddar sprinkled inside and woodsmoke bacon and caramelized onions added; mini-pies tossed from calzone-sized doughballs with motz-stuffed crust and a double-layer of pepperoni with pesto-squeezed zigzags. Over everything, Tossers sprinkle the shaker filled with herbs for breadsticks called “LOVE.”

Counter Girls come up to Tossers as they eat at the bar in front of the pizza production line. Tossers and Counter Girls share the food as they ask each other’s opinions:
- “Like the mustache?” Tossers ask.
- “Lip scarf?” Counter Girls ask back.
- “Like these pants?” Counter Girls ask.
- “Jights.” Tossers make up new words.
- “What if there’s only one?” Tossers ask.
- “Girlfriends are temporary,” Counter Girls say.

Tossers get back behind the counter and on the line. Toppers put in their order with Counter Girls. Tossers tell Toppers to clock out already, they will top Toppers’ slice.
Tips are split in half with Counter Girls and then split among all the guys on the line in accordance with their percentage of time on a shift. Tossers don’t want to share.

Tossers laugh, laugh, laugh when Toppers bite into the crust of their slice to find a hidden jalapeño. Toppers swallow the choke of pepper with a sip from their shift beer pint of PBR. This is a game they play. Toppers will put an olive in Tossers’ slice tomorrow.

Tossers trance while watching action sports on the flat-screen mounted to the wall above the taps. On the beer fridge hangs a banner with Arnold flexing and his quote, from *Pumping Iron*, “Milk is for babies.” The screens show tan dudes who wake, skate, surf – spinning in lakes, hurling on concrete, carving up waves.

“What do you think?” Toppers ask.


“Hot or cute?” Toppers raise their eyebrows.

“Either can’t trust ’em or they’re just for fun, here.” Tossers smile without showing their teeth.

Tossers do third cut:

- Wipe down all surfaces (including walls)
- Refill sauce and cheese
- Take out trash
- Scrape ovens
- Toss

Tossers stay clocked in for the next shift. They stand behind the counter and listen to the store. Toppers flirt with Counter Girls, asking where they’re from.

Counter Girls tell Toppers they’ve come straight out of high school, enrolled in community college, and worked service jobs.

Toppers ask Counter Girls where they’re going. Counter Girls say they’ll continue in hospitality, maybe take GREs.

Counter Girls ask back Toppers’ questions. Toppers say, “Florida” and “Hawai’i” and “the Coast”; and then “Adventuring.” All true. Guys on the line are made of sun, sand, and saltwater. They will go everywhere.
Tossers wander back to the dish pit with an odd plate and salad bowl. Tossers slap the dish pit’s drywall with all the names of Tossers marked in height from tallest to shortest: Papa Rex, M-House, Marsh, Keanu, Wilbur, C-Dub, José, Major, MicMac, Spvek, Ruffio, Leisure, Senajoa, Conway, Hess.

“CHALLENGE!” Counter Girls call.

Tossers go back on the line and cheese a thirty-inch large the size of a hula-hoop, bake it, slice it, and then set it up in front of Customers.

“Two hours. Gotta eat all of it. No help. No going to the bathroom,” Tossers say. “Good luck.”

Tossers consider the impossibility of the Pizza Challenge: All eight slices, including the crust. The closest Tossers have seen Customers get in the Challenge is seven slices, with spinach. Tossers don’t know how that works – like some kind of Popeye strength – just that that was the closest.

Mid:

The store blurs in a compressing rush where unlike lunch Tossers only pay attention to themselves and their own task. Tossers toss up a set and when they turn around their pie rack is down to one pie. Tossers’ muscles fill with panic and lactic acid. Tossers mantra: “Breathe, it’s just pizza.”

But it’s more than just pizza. This moment of hyper-awareness creates a spell. Everything exists at the pinnacle. Up in the air at the top of a throw’s arc.

Tossers drink anything with sugar, calories, and caffeine to continue: Yoohoo, Mountain Dew, Black-Eye Coffee, Red Bull, Monster, 5-Hour Energy. They save Adderall for studying and X for partying.

Suddenly – once the bar Underground Blues and the club Riot open and their bands and DJs play – the store empties. It feels less like an afternoon nap and more like a post-workout cool down. Tossers stand in the walk-in freezer and let their sweat chill.

Tossers’ walk back to their corner and note that their pie rack finally holds enough pies. Throughout the shifts Tossers have mostly gotten eight whole slices off each pie. Some have torn from thin spots on the dough and the sauce on others has slopped over their crust, but Tossers have, slowly, come to terms with that.

But Tossers have just watched two slices taken from their pie rack, slid down ‘Toppers’ cutting board, and the overflow of cheese crusties cut by Pullers. Perfect.

At the bar, two girls sit on stools next to each other and get these perfect slices. One of the girls wears a gold dress and heels and the other wears a cowgirl outfit with a hat and boots. A translucent piece falls from Gold Girl. At first, Tossers think it’s a white onion because it shines like it was pulled perfect out of the oven. Tossers like that Gold Girl ordered onions. She likes the taste and doesn’t care how her breath will smell. But then Gold Girl picks up the piece from the floor and before Tossers can say, “The Five Second Rule doesn’t work too well here,” she sticks the piece of double-sided tape – not an onion – underneath the top of her dress, to not flash side-boob.

Both Gold Girl and Cowgirl don’t finish their slices. They’re nibblers. They don’t even know how perfect their slices were. The girls leave, but then Cowgirl comes back inside. Cowgirl shows Tossers a phone number on a slip of paper, points to Gold Girl waving through the front window. Then she writes another number on the back, winks, and hands it to Tossers. Without looking, Tossers throw the numbers in the trash.

“Drunk”:

The store stays open for the clubbers and bar-folk to come in. It’s 11 PM and it seems like so far away from those original eleven pies tossed at open. Half a day and two full shifts past. Only Tossers do Ironmen – open, mid, and drunk; three shifts in a row.

Tossers hurt in their bones, their muscles already pushed through ache toward collapse. Tossers’ knuckles inflame with what they believe is early-onset arthritis. Tossers just want to be able to sit down for a second during the shift and so they need Toppers to know how to toss.

For Toppers, Tossers don’t demo the dough press, creating a crust, or throwing a pie. Tossers expect Toppers to have watched them. And haven’t they? Isn’t tossing the point of working here? Don’t all the guys on the line want to work up to tossing?

Because if not tossing, then what? Food? Tips? Counter Girls? All of that is elsewhere. For Tossers, tossing is the undeniable reason.

Toppers move from shadowing the hand motions of Tossers to using a damp dishrag as dough and then actually handling real dough. Toppers sometimes suck up to Tossers, talking about preparation of soaking gummy bears and cherries in rum for the past week for this party tomorrow that, of course, Tossers are welcome to come to. At the same time, there’s Toppers who say, “How’s life?” and genuinely want to know. Tossers talk about not fucking a revolving-door of Counter Girls and Customers anymore, because now there’s this one they’re exclusively seeing, and the sex is better than anything, but there’s more than that, too, and they don’t know how to say it.
Toppers ask, “Is it good because it’s wild?” Toppers toss a pie: flicking the dough off their fingertips. “Or is it good because it’s love?” Toppers catch the dough spinning, the pie opening, stretching, as it spins on their hands.

“Damn,” Tossers say. It’s a damn good toss, it’s damn good sex, and it might just be damn good love; and anyone would be a damn fool to drop either.

Tossers believe in Toppers becoming Tossers, and plan to tell Managers that. Tossers will also tell Managers that this is not a move to manage. But now, Tossers tell Pullers to get off the line, get a slice, and get some rest before going to the dish pit to start close.

Pullers only have enough cash for a single slice of cheese, which will sustain them, but Tossers tell Toppers to “Load that slice up.” Pullers are thankful when they get a slice of cheese with a triple-layer of pepperoni camouflaged on top of the marinara sauce and hidden beneath a blizzard of mozzarella. “We take care of our own,” Tossers say.

Tossers remember little kindnesses: like when they were Pullers and forgot their hat at home (they couldn’t clock in unless their hair was covered) and Tossers took off their hat and put it on their head. Tossers keep a bandana under their hat like Tossers.

It’s last call at 1:45 AM. And so, Managers walk around the store and tell Customers to finish. At 2 AM Counter Girls pick up pint glasses and pitchers of beer. Some still full, others more empty.

In the last hour, everything ebbs. Customers trickle from the clubs and bars. Most orders are single cheese slices. An occasional Caesar salad.

Close:

Managers set a playlist of songs everyone listened to on the bus rides to and from middle school. Pullers continue in the dish pit. Toppers wipe down every surface and wrap up toppings. Tossers sweep all the flour from their corner. Counter Girls bring in umbrellas from the beer garden and lock up the chairs and tables outside.

Tossers pour remaining sauce back in the sauce bin and dump leftover cheese in the cheese bin in the walk-in freezer. Tossers refill their corner fridge with trays of dough. Tossers scrape out and brush ovens. Tossers spray and scrub ovens.

Tossers splash bleach water on the floor, scrubbing it in, and then squeegee it from their corner past Toppers’ line, past Pullers’ counter for plates, past Counter Girls’ registers, past the stores’ dry-good shelves, past the swampy dish pit, and out the back door where next to the dumpster mats hang over a railing drip-drying from a spraydown. Tossers untie their apron and throw it in the laundry bucket next to the “shark cage” of kegs. Flour outlines an inverse tan line where the apron didn’t cover up their black shirt.

Tossers pour their shift beer and clock out at the end of eighteen hours. Tossers sip their beer as Counter Girls flip bar stools back up onto the bar, Toppers spot-mop footprints on the floor, Pullers wipe down the dish pit walls’ condensation, and Managers distribute tips. Tossers shuffle out of the store.

Tossers clutch their wad of cash. Tossers head over to their car. Tossers drive home in the haze of sunrise.