

POLITICS

I Analyzed 1,500 “Pizza” Mentions in the Epstein Files. Here’s What I Found.

Forget the Pizzagate codes. The real, dark story is hiding in plain sight.

JAMES WEST 12 HOURS AGO



Mother Jones illustration; Getty; Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office/ZUMA



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Less than two months before his arrest on sex-trafficking charges in 2019, Jeffrey Epstein was on top of the world—at least going by his iMessages.

Over the course of three days in May, he fired off more than 60 texts to his powerful besties. A self-appointed expert on any topic, Epstein sparred with a cocky Steve Bannon over Trump's first-term trade war with China and discussed Bannon's recent trip to Norway.

For reasons we'll perhaps never know—Bannon didn't get back to me—their banter turned to the political leanings of a mass killer.

"Did you tell Norwegians that the child murderer was a lefty radical?" Epstein asked Bannon—presumably a reference to Anders Breivik, the far-right extremist who killed 77 people in the country in 2011, most of them teenagers. "Yes yes yes," Bannon replied. "Went over well!!!"

Epstein noted the killer "gave a Nazi salute" and claimed he'd also made an antisemitic crack comparing Jews and pizza: "The pizza doesn't scream when you throw it in the oven."

This joke, if you can call it that, isn't about pizza, not really. But it is one of nearly 1,500 mentions of "pizza"—literal, figurative, or just plain strange—across more than 10,600 pages culled from the Epstein files that are breathing new life to an old conspiracy. Internet sleuths have seized on the appearance of the word "pizza" in the files as code for children, just as they did during Pizzagate, the thoroughly debunked conspiracy theory that spun the WikiLeaks release of Hillary Clinton aide John Podesta's emails into false claims that Democrats ran a child-sex ring out of Comet Ping Pong, a Washington, DC, pizzeria. The use of "cheese pizza" in those emails was first suggested by a 4chan user to be coded language for "C.P." or "child porn," while "pizza" itself was used to mean girls, alongside other supposed shorthand terms tied to pedophilia.

“What the fuck is pizza? How far does this go? How come this never got released before? What is happening?”

This has convinced some readers of the Epstein files that Pizzagate was “right this whole time” and that Epstein was involved. Tucker Carlson tweeted that “it looks like Pizzagate is basically real.” Talking about the Epstein files, the world's biggest podcaster, Joe Rogan, complained: “What the fuck is pizza? How far does this go? How come this never got released before? What is happening?”

Meanwhile, Congresswoman Lauren Boebert asked Secretary Clinton during a House Oversight Committee hearing about whether she had examined links between Epstein and Pizzagate. “Comet Ping Pong Pizza, used as code, possibly?” she pressed. Clinton was withering: “I can't believe you're even referencing it.”

Madam Secretary, I can take things from here.



Comet Ping Pong, the D.C. pizzeria falsely linked to a child-sex conspiracy in 2016. The release of the Epstein files has revived those claims. **Michael S. Williamson/The Washington Post/Getty**

Using the A.I. tool Claude Co-work, I pulled every “pizza” reference from the Justice Department’s searchable Epstein website, then reviewed and labeled them—bank statements, emails, spam, legal filings, text chains—flagging duplicates along the way.

What’s in abundant evidence is that Epstein’s crimes were horrific and far-reaching, and left scores of victims still seeking justice. The vast trove released under the Epstein Files Transparency Act has already toppled prominent figures by revealing the international conspiracy of silence that enabled his abuse—sparking new investigations here and abroad.

But a *pizza* conspiracy? Not so much.

On that front, the big finding in my analysis was pure ubiquity. Americans adore pizza, after all: More than one-in-ten are eating pizza on any given day. Epstein and his crew, well, they loved pizza too. Seen this way, it’s no surprise that pizza appears throughout a trove that reconstructs everything that touched Epstein’s life over a decade, another lens through which to view his personality and his crimes. Or if you’re a Pizzagate proponent, distract you from them.

It appears in a 2001 Bear Stearns statement tied to a shadowy Epstein trust, which records the sale of 500 California Pizza Kitchen shares through another entity later run by Epstein's lawyer, Darren Indyke—who is now in the process of settling a case brought by Epstein's victims, alleging Indyke facilitated sex trafficking. (Indyke's lawyer said in an email he agreed to settle to "achieve finality" and "did nothing wrong.") Pizza appears again in about \$2 million worth of Domino's Pizza stock trades in April 2012 for a firm associated with the husband of Lesley Groff, Epstein's longtime executive assistant. It appears in the text logs and transcripts of federal agents, and petty-cash logs for Epstein's staff, and menus across Manhattan and West Palm Beach. In Little Saint James, a.k.a. Epstein Island, staff proposed paying a popular "sailboat pizzeria" for extra water-borne security to deter unwanted visitors. "Better than pizza," claims *Massage for Dummies*, a book that is excerpted multiple times in the files because Epstein gave the book to victims he paid to massage him. It's what Epstein victim Virginia Giuffre, then 17, said she ate after he sexually assaulted her during a massage on her first trip to New York—slipping out of the mansion for a "giant slice of pepperoni pizza... the best I had ever had."

Pizza also provided social grease, bringing the rich and powerful together inside Epstein's lavish Manhattan mansion throughout the decade when the deceased financier was rebuilding his social circle after his first arrest and incarceration—dishing out slices just as he did favors and money. To aid in such dinner parties, Woody Allen's wife Soon-Yi Previn once sent Epstein's staff in 2015 a prim dinner-party tutorial—flowers on the table for height, never forget salad plates nor candles for "romantic mood"—scolding them for serving pizza from the Mark Hotel last instead of first. Previn didn't return my emails; faux pas experts can debate.

Food chat was overlaid with the coordination of Epstein's Stendra medication for erectile dysfunction.

Nearly half of all pizza references I analyzed in the files are found in personal emails and texts, Epstein's and those of various figures in his multiverse. Plenty of the Pizzagate-style sleuthing has centered on correspondence involving Epstein's urologist, Dr. Harry Fisch, in which Fisch repeatedly used the phrase "pizza and grape soda." Fisch didn't respond to my email or texts asking if there was anything more to these pizza references. But the references were among many texts about snacks and treats. They discuss Jewish deli food, like kasha from 2nd Ave Deli, pastrami, kishkas, and Chinese cookies. "Greenberg's bakery just started making pop-tarts," Fisch enthused; Epstein set a date to go. Fisch shared photos of the food he mentioned throughout, including one of literal pizza and actual grape soda. All this food chat was overlaid with dinner invites to hang out with Woody Allen, and the coordination of Epstein's Stendra medication for erectile dysfunction.

In August 2017, Epstein wrote an email berating financier Leon Black, with whom he was falling out, for ignoring his acumen: "LEON You are not running a pizza place, a pilates studio in queens or an internet start up. you have a 6 billion operation." Asked if this mention was a Pizzagate euphemism, a spokesperson for Black said, "This is ridiculous. There is no other interpretation than another of the many derogatory comments by Epstein about the way Mr. Black's family office was being run which along with his constant demand for more in fees is among the reasons Mr. Black fired him."

In August 2018, Microsoft's first CTO Nathan Myhrvold wrote to tell Epstein he was off to Italy to research a book about pizza—what would become *Modernist Pizza*: three hardcover volumes, 2021 retail price \$425. Epstein forwarded a chain email listing discounts at pizzerias ("10% off" for the over-sixties) to his partner-in-crime, Ghislaine Maxwell, and then to Jean-Luc Brunel, the deceased modeling honcho who took his own life while awaiting trial for sex crimes in France in 2022. "Don't lose the list," Brunel replied. "Yoou [sic] might want to use it one day." Todd Meister—the ex-husband of Hilton heiress (and Paris's sister) Nicky Rothschild—forwarded Epstein flyers for a secretive, invite-only roving strip night known as Saint Venus Theater, featuring complimentary pizza at 11 p.m. "A gift," he wrote. Neither Myhrvold nor Meister got back to me.

These are just a few of the many strangely revealing pizza mentions in the pile. But it's one man's unrivaled love for a New York slice that dominates roughly a third of all the pizza correspondence I uncovered.

Bobby Slayton is a retired stand-up comic once billed as the "Pitbull of Comedy." When he toured New York City, Epstein offered him an apartment at 301 East 66th Street, the complex where he also housed models and, at times, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak.

"The only thing I'm guilty of is being friends with that idiot."

When I spoke to Slayton recently about Epstein, he was impassioned. "I never saw any of this shit with the young girls," he said. "I just wanted this in writing—that I was never a witness, or a party to his repulsive activities, okay? I mean, the only thing I'm guilty of is being friends with that idiot."

Slayton told *Mother Jones* in 2020 that "Jeffrey was a giant comedy fan, huge." And Slayton told me that he was willing to indulge Epstein because he was thrilled by the free apartment, which he dubbed "Chez Slay" in scores of emails. "If an apartment is empty it will save me a ton of dough!" he wrote to Lesley Groff, in May 2014. "Then I can afford to take JE out for pizza!"

Could that be code? In the screenplay version of their email relationship, Slayton's standing offer to take Epstein out for pizza would be a running gag. He got his wish, at least once, in October 2013, when the records show they met at Arturo's Pizza, one of Slayton's favorite haunts.



Bobby Slayton, the self-described “Pitbull of Comedy,” in 2022. “I’m kind of known as a foodie and a pizza freak,” he said. **Michael S. Schwartz/Getty**

“I’m kind of known as a foodie and a pizza freak,” Slayton told me. “It’s right there in front of you: I’m really talking about fucking pizza, goddamn it.”

On this point, the evidence is incontrovertible.

Across a six-and-a-half-year arc during which Epstein was living as a convicted sex offender—January 2013 to May 2019—Slayton chronicled his pizza exploits to Epstein and Groff with the dedication of a battlefield historian. “Walked 65 blocks in fucking FREEZING weather to the Village for pizza,” he wrote in one of the earliest exchanges. “Gonna TRY to walk back and conk out by 9PM like the old Jew I am.” After three of his four Long Island shows were cancelled the following month, Groff offered Epstein’s apartment so he “can hole up and write, drink wine, eat pizza and sleep!” In May 2013, he wrote that he “walked 50 blocks to East Harlem Patsy’s for pizza,” delighted by the money he’d saved on lodging: “Money I can spend on pizza AND wine!!!!” An August 2017 trek, Slayton claimed, spanned 300 blocks and hit Rao’s, John’s, Joe’s, and Pasquale Jones—all New York institutions. “How do you stay fit with all that pizza!?” Groff marveled at one point. “Wait, you are probably walking there from the apartment.” In one of his last pizza dispatches, he’s practically giddy, describing Christmas at Spago, where he ordered the off-menu “salmon pizza with caviar”—“Wolfgang Puck’s signature pie,” he raved. “He used to call it the ‘Jewish Pizza!’”

“I’m glad YOU like the jew pie!” Groff wrote. “I’ll stick with a plain cheese!” (In actual fact, Groff once picked up a Lean Cuisine vegetable pizza from a Food Emporium in New Canaan, Connecticut: \$3.89.)

His infatuation with “real pizza, an honest-to-God pizza,” he told me, was “nothing to do with children or pedophilia.”

“A real fucking pizza. That’s it. That’s it. On my mother’s life!”

Slayton’s ties to Epstein weren’t only about pizza. Epstein introduced him to Woody Allen. “He wanted me to bring comedians over—and the comedians wanted to meet Woody Allen,” Slayton told me. He recalled a few dinners at Epstein’s townhouse. “They’d put out a sumptuous meal, and [Epstein] would sit there with Oreo cookies and a grilled-cheese sandwich,” he said. “He ate like a five-year-old, you know?”

Still, all that pizza diplomacy paid off: Slayton landed a small role in Allen’s 2016 Amazon miniseries, *Crisis in Six Scenes*.



Woody Allen in “Play It Again, Sam,” 1972. In the Epstein files, Allen is a recurring dinner guest—and his wife Soon-Yi Previn once chided Epstein’s staff for serving the pizza course in the wrong order. **Screen Archives/Getty**

Receipts themselves show why pizza is everywhere in the Epstein files.

The Epstein Pizza Economy was geographically vast. Nearly 30 percent of the pizza mentions I found appeared in financial records—bank statements, cash ledgers, and food orders. I identified more than \$2,400 in pizza charges on Epstein’s own accounts. By dollar amount, his favorite spot was Pizza Al Fresco, a palm tree-studded courtyard restaurant about a mile from his Palm Beach compound. Records from his local New York joint, Pizza Park Pizzeria on Manhattan’s East Side, go back even further—to 2004, when he picked up orders for \$8.50.

Seamless deliveries for Karyna Shuliak, Epstein’s last known girlfriend, suggest pricier tastes: Burrata Pizza from Lavo (\$30.05); Fresh Margherita from Mediterraneo (with apple pie and tiramisu, \$45.80); Funghi Pizza from Bella Blu (\$30.05); Reginella Pizza from Numero 28 UES (\$20.51).

Financial documents gathered during the 2000s also include extensive petty-cash logs meticulously tracking daily expenditures for groceries, gas, and travel for Epstein’s staff. The

logs appear to have been compiled by Epstein staffer Janusz Banasiak, who was subpoenaed to give evidence against his boss. From 2005 to 2006, I found about 40 charges for Papa John's pizza at \$12.77—the price of a large pie at the time, including tax.

“Remember that you see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing, except to answer a question directed at you.”

Scroll a little further into this file, beyond the hundreds of dollars worth of pizza orders, and be reminded that you don't need to hunt for code to find Epstein's darkness. In this case: a “household manual” for his Palm Beach estate at 358 El Brillo Way. “Remember that you see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing, except to answer a question directed at you,” it reads. The manual was dated Valentine's Day 2005, exactly one month before a Florida couple came to the Palm Beach Police Department alleging “some kind of sexual relationship” between their 14-year-old daughter and a local older man—sparking the initial investigation against Epstein.



Ghislaine Maxwell at one of Epstein's properties. The files are full of mundane details—grocery runs, pizza deliveries, Lean Cuisine receipts—that still offer a lens into the conspiracy of silence that enabled his abuse. **Department of Justice**

As federal investigators pursued leads into Epstein's crimes, his death, and Ghislaine Maxwell's conduct, Pizzagate conspiracism inevitably bled into the case files. Days after Epstein's arrest in 2019, emails from a redacted sender apparently caught in the blast radius, complained that "things have really revved up."

"I have found myself at the center of the QAnon conspiracy," the writer said, referring to the Pizzagate-offshoot theory that Donald Trump was secretly fighting a global, deep-state cabal. "It has become a very distressing situation," they added, reporting that Q followers were posting "violent messages daily." Fearing for their safety, they wrote that they hoped the FBI was doing something about Pizzagate.

The files reveal the methodical work of investigators pressing ahead regardless, the ubiquity of pizza visible every step along the way. The day after Epstein died in New York City's Metropolitan Correctional Center, text logs between federal agents show the logistics of gearing up for raids. As one crew flew to St. Thomas, another agent placed an order for 19 pizzas. After Epstein's apparent suicide, investigators soon interrogated the on-duty prison guards, seizing their bank statements (and bringing more pizza orders into the files), and they canvassed a pizzeria where, according to the documents, a correctional officer met another individual. It was fruitless: "The pizza establishment did not have working cameras."

In May 2021, two federal agents concluded an interview with a practicing psychotherapist and reflexologist about her work at Epstein's Zorro Ranch between 1999 and 2008—an hour occasionally interrupted by her dogs, Irvin and Stella, according to the transcript. Before the recorder clicked off and the agents hit the road, something appetizing wafted through. Cue small talk.

"Smells like somebody's bakin' bread," the subject said. After a beat, she corrected herself: "No, I don't think so. I think the place next door is a pizza place."

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