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Wetzel's Pretzels founder develops fast-casual pizza concept

Blaze Fast Fire'd Pizza is entering the growing fast-casual, artisan pizza niche

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A Wetzel's Pretzels founder is poised to launch a new fast-casual pizza concept called Blaze Fast Fire'd Pizza that targets the growing niche for quick artisan pies.

Rick Wetzel, cofounder and president of Wetzel's Pretzels with his wife Elise Wetzel, developed Blaze, which has a slew of high-profile investors, including former California First Lady Maria Shriver, movie producer John Davis and Boston Red Sox co-owner Tom Werner.



The first Blaze restaurant is scheduled to open in August in Irvine, Calif., near the University of California. Irvine campus. Two more units are planned to open before the end of the year, in Pasadena and West Los Angeles. Wetzel said he plans to grow the chain through franchising once the concept is established.

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Blaze joins a growing number of pizza concepts vying for fast-casual positioning that borrows elements from Chipotle Mexican Grill, with its customizable menu and dishes prepared in front of guests as they walk a service line.

Others targeting the niche include 800 Degrees in Los Angeles; Pieology in Fullerton, Calif.; Mod Pizza in Seattle; and Uncle Maddio's in Atlanta.

Wetzel said he sees an opportunity in offering artisan-style pizzas with a quick Chipotle-like format, a trend that he predicts will cause a seismic change in the estimated \$35 billion U.S. pizza industry.



Most 11-inch pizzas at Blaze will be priced at \$6.85, according to Wetzel.

Guests at Blaze, for example, will walk to the counter where housemade dough will be pressed into a pan. Guests can either co-create their pizza by selecting from among about 40 toppings - from crumbled meatballs and gorgonzola to barbecue sauce and pineapple - or choose one of nine pre-designed pizzas.

As guests pay and get drinks, their pizza is cooked in an 800-degree open-hearth oven, and takes about two minutes to bake.

Wetzel said most 11-inch pizzas will be priced at \$6.85, while a plain cheese pizza will be about \$5.

The crust, which Wetzel described as thin and crispy, was created by executive chef Bradford Kent, owner of Los Angeles-acclaimed Olio Pizzeria & Café, who was hired to help develop the menu and ended up joining the team as a partner, Wetzel said.

Wetzel pointed out high-end pie makers like Mario Batali's and Nancy Silverton's Pizzeria Mozza in Los Angeles, where consumers have learned to love artisan and Neopolitan-style pizzas. Blaze aims to make such quality pizzas available for a quick lunch and for less than \$10.

The first Blaze location will be about 2,600 square feet with 90 seats. The design, by Ana Henton of MASS Architecture and Design, will be contemporary, but with a soul.

"I really wanted it to be something my friends would walk into and say, 'This rocks,'" Wetzel said.

Based in Pasadena, Calif., the company estimates that Blaze locations will average about \$2 million in sales, Wetzel said, adding that it will target busy lunch locations such as shopping malls.

Wetzel, who founded the 250-unit mall-based Wetzel's Pretzels chain with Bill Phelps in 1994, said he has nearly two decades of experience in franchising, marketing and brand development, and he's confident that the Blaze concept could be a national brand despite the growing competition.

"I've been through the pretzel wars, even though we might have been the 20th guy in to that game," he said. "It was a cutthroat for a lot of years, but we survived in the end by executing well."

As with better burgers, high-quality fast-casual pizza as a growing category will more likely make value-oriented delivery chains like Domino's nervous, he said.

"Who's going to want to eat Domino's if enough companies come along that do pizza really well?" Wetzel said.

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