SPENDING

n the Chipotle 'Fast Casual' Approach Work for Pizza?

By Brad Tuttle | Oct. 01, 2012 | 5 Comments

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The "fast-casual" restaurant concept has been enormously successful for Chipotle, Panera Bread, and "better burger" chains like Five Guys. The idea, which the value-conscious, pressed-for-time American consumer has embraced with open arms, is to offer a speedy dining experience with better quality than typical fast food, at a better price than a typical sit-down restaurant. Around the country, entrepreneurs and emerging franchises are now testing whether the concept that works so well with burgers and burritos can be applied to pizza.

According to the folks at Zagat, the "Chipotle-ization of pizza" is well underway in parts of the U.S. Industry publication Nation's Restaurant News also credits Chipotle as the inspiration for fast-casual pizza specialists such as PizzaRev, 800 Degrees, and Blaze Pizza—all of which are based in southern California—as well as several in other parts of the country, including Seattle-based MOD Pizza and Uncle Maddio's, a chain found primarily in the Southeast, with 75 locations in development.

What all of these establishments tend to have in common—with each other, and with Chipotle—is made-to-order customization, in which diners select exactly which toppings they want on which kind of pizza. The word "artisan" pops up again and again. Also: speed. Blaze Pizza chose its name for more than one reason; pizzas are cooked in blazing hot ovens, and come out blazingly quick (120 seconds), with the result being "fast-fire'd, perfectly crisp perfection." 800 Degrees and its ultra-hot ovens (guess how hot?) brags about being even quicker, pumping out "250-year-old classic" pizzas in one minute flat.

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These restaurants also tend to feature reasonable-but-not-bargain prices (around $8 for an individual pizza), assembly lines with fresh ingredients, as well as plenty of stainless steel, see-through glass and open kitchens—so that, like Chipotle, the impression is that they have nothing to hide. Heck, Uncle

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Maddio's even uses a color scheme that's eerily similar to Chipotle, with rust-brown menus featuring plain white typeface.

Irv Zuckerman, one of the founders of PizzaRev, which just opened a second location in California and plans on expanding to between 5 and 15 spots in 2013, told Nation's Restaurant News that Chipotle was an obvious inspiration. "We loved what Chipotle has done in presenting something that gives you freedom of choice, and we're expanding on that with the most popular of foods: pizza," he said.

"Pizza was always seen as a dinner food because it took so long to make a quality pizza," Irving said. But thanks to super-hot ovens and the assembly line, fast-casual model, it's much easier to for chains like PizzaRev to attract lunch customers, as well as folks seeking quick takeout during the dinner hours.

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Studies have shown that American consumers have been eating more pizza in recent years; 41% now eat pizza at least once a week, up from 26% just a couple of years ago. Based on the latest restaurant trends, it looks like we're going to be eating even more pizza in the years to come.

Brad Tuttle is a reporter at TIME. *Find him on Twitter at @bradrtuttle. You can also continue the discussion on* TIME*'s Facebook page and on Twitter at @TIME.*

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Brad Tuttle covers business and personal finance for TIME. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife and four sons, and also teaches journalism at **UMass-Amherst**.

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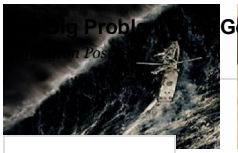

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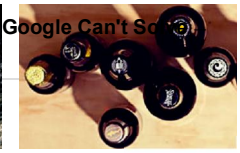

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Brian Lutz Oct 14, 2012

Big fan of MOD Pizza here. I don't work close enough to one for it to be a viable lunch option anymore, but when I did it was easily one of the better lunch options in town. I worry that they're trying to expand a bit too fast, but the product is very good.

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Denise Taylor Babin Oct 1, 2012

Absolutely fantastic! Uncle Maddio's is my favorite lunch spot now, by far. It is so fresh and fast. The people are friendly and helpful. The kid events are fantastic with crafts and lots of fun for the whole family. I Love Uncle Maddio's!!!

Like Reply

BanjoBuxby **BanjoBuxby** Oct 3, 2012

bless you that's so fabulous!!!!!!

Like Reply

LegitQuestions Oct 1, 2012

Include Sauce in the Phoenix, AZ area and Tucson, AZ. Its not as quick serve as Chipotle or in 120 seconds like described above, but it is very reasonably priced pizza, salad and light pasta served very quickly.

Like Reply

Emory Dowell Oct 1, 2012

Uncle Maddios works because it has hires amazing staffs, serves great food, has a family friendly atmosphere (kids events in the summer and every Saturday at lunchtime) and is affordable! We've been to three (Woodstock, Alpharetta and Kennesaw, Georgia) and would recommend them to anyone. Fast amp; Family - an excellent recipe.

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