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Wetzel ramps up new venture

Blaze Pizza to open Pasadena location in September

By Kevin Smith, SGVN

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PASADENA - Wetzel's Pretzels founder Rick Wetzel and his wife Elise are gearing up to launch a new concept that's a little less ... well, twisted.

The entrepreneurs plan to open three Blaze Pizza locations this year - one in Pasadena, one in Irvine and another on the west side of Los Angeles.

Blaze Pizza will use an assembly line format, allowing guests to either customize one of the menu's signature pizzas, or create a unique pizza all their own.

And once a pizza is created, it won't take long to bake - 120 seconds, to be exact.

"These are thinner crust, artisanal pizzas, and we cook them in a big open hearth at 800 degrees," Rick Wetzel said. "As you go down the assembly line picking out your ingredients, your pizza is already in the oven."

The pizzas are considered personal pizzas, although they're sizable at 11 inches.

And the cost?

"The price for a pizza will range from \$6.85 to \$6.85," Wetzel joked. "Actually, we'll also have a plain cheese pizza for \$5. We wanted to create a really good value, but also give really fine quality. I wanted to create the kind of place where my friends could walk in and say, 'This is a really a cool place.'"

Blaze will feature the talents of executive chef Bradford Kent, who owns L.A.'s top-rated Olio Pizzeria & Cafe.

"This is an opportunity for me to take the years I've spent developing my dough recipe and bring it to a broader audience," Kent

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said he couldn't reveal where the west side location will be as details are still being worked out. But he's already planning to expand his new venture.

"We'll have three open by the end of the year and then we'll start franchising," he said. "We'll probably have 15 stores open by the end of 2013."

Pizza is big business in the U.S. with an estimated 65,000-plus pizzerias nationwide, so competition is fierce. But Wetzel figures he's hit upon a unique concept in fast-casual dining.

"I don't see anyone else in this niche," he said. "I wanted something with a soul, and I wanted some ambience."

Blaze Pizza teamed up with Principal Designer Ana Henton of MASS Architecture & Design to design the restaurant's interior and exterior.

Daniel Conway, a spokesman for the California Restaurant Association, said Wetzel has hit on two points that should play well in today's economy - a low price and a fast-casual experience.

"Fast-casual places like Chipotle and Tender Greens ... that's where a lot of the smart money is going," he said. "And if you can turn over a pizza in two minutes, that seems to have a lot of value."

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