



Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza

New Fast-Casual Pizza Concept Winning Fans with Its Freakishly Fast, "Co-Created" Artisinal Pizzas

Restaurant watchers looking for the "next big thing" are keeping a close eye on Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza, an innovative concept bringing pizza to fast-casual dining. The restaurant has just opened its first location – a 2,600 sq. ft., 90-seat space in Irvine, and construction has already begun on a second location – a 2,800 sq. ft., 100-seat location in Pasadena, California, which is set to open in the city's vibrant Theater District in late September. A third location in Los Ange-

tainment), and prefers to have co-tenancy with similar contemporary fast-casual brands (i.e. Chipotle, Five Guys, Panera Bread). Ideal restaurant size is 1,800 to 2,200 square feet, plus an outdoor patio. A smaller footprint design is also available for mall food courts.

Blaze Pizza uses a "co-created", assembly line format (similar to Chipotle Mexican Grill®), that lets guests customize one of the menu's signature pizzas or create one of their own, choosing from a wide selection of fresh, artisanal toppings – most included for no extra charge. The generously sized personal pizzas are then sent to a blazing hot open-hearth oven, the centerpiece of the eatery, where dedicated pizzasmiths ensure that the thin-crust pies are "fast-fire'd" in a scant 120 seconds. Blaze Pizza makes its own dough from scratch using a recipe Kent developed, which requires a 24-hour fermentation period to produce his signature

a beverage and pay – feeling good, as they'll typically be out less than \$10 for a generously sized personal pizza and a drink. By the time they've grabbed a table, their crisp-crust pizza is ready to enjoy.

"This is an opportunity for me to take the years I've spent developing my dough recipe and bring it to a broader audience," says Chef Kent. "My Olivo customers are big fans of the crust. I think they see it as a perfect, simple base that lets them get really creative with the fresh vegetables, meats and sauce on top."

To create a fast-casual environment that is comfortably hip with a "soul," Blaze Pizza teamed with principal designer Ana Henton of MASS Architecture and Design (Intellegentia, Lukshon, Breadbar) to design the restaurants' interior and exterior. Designed to be casual, current and hip, Henton uses architectural notes inspired by fire and foundries. Additionally, the restaurant has gone to great lengths to see that its packaging, with a playful graphic style, is eco-friendly – made in the USA from post-consumer recycled and/or sustainable materials.

Pizza in the United States is big business – with an estimated 65,000+ pizzerias generating more than \$35 billion in sales annually. Still, the Wetzels believe that there is a sizable opportunity in the rapidly-growing fast-casual segment. "Today, most take-out, delivery and dine-in pizza places fall short for discerning pizza fans looking for a quick bite," says Rick Wetzel, Blaze Pizza's chief ideator. "We're able to deliver an unbelievably good pizza, lightning fast, at a very affordable price."

Blaze Pizza's first two stores will be company-owned and operated. Going forward, the company plans to grow through a combination of both company-owned and franchise locations, with franchise sales expected later this year. **CC**



les' west side is also underway. The company plans to have 15+ Southern California locations by the end of 2013, and to partner with franchisees to grow into a national brand.

A creation of Elise and Rick Wetzel (founder of Wetzel's Pretzels), Blaze Pizza features the talents of Executive Chef Bradford Kent, owner of Los Angeles' top rated Olivo Pizzeria & Cafe (Zagat's #2 pizza in Los Angeles) and is backed by investors including Maria Shriver, movie producer John Davis and Boston Red Sox co-owner Tom Werner. Over the next few years, the company plans to build a large footprint of stores across California and select US cities through a combination of both company-owned and franchise locations. Blaze is primarily focusing on centers that service both lunch/daytime traffic (office workers, hospitals, lifestyle, and transportation) and dinner/nighttime traffic (residential and enter-



light-as-air, crisp crust. Blaze's menu uses fresh ingredients ranging from inventive to classic and accommodates certain dietary needs, with a gluten-free dough and vegan cheese option.

Guests may also opt for one of the restaurant's signature salads – like the Antipasto or Caprini – or create their own from a wide selection of fresh greens, toppings and house-made dressings. The diner's last step is to select

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