

In a Twist, Pretzel Vendors Will Try Selling Pizza

Wetzels to launch Blaze Fast-Fire'd concept with two SoCal locations

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Wetzel's Pretzels co-founders Rick and Elise Wetzel are now rolling their dough into the pizza business. The duo will open two fast-casual pizza restaurants, called Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza, this summer.

The concept is based on an assembly line process, similar to that of Chipotle Mexican Grill. But instead of burritos or tacos, customers will make 11-inch personalized pizzas with toppings such as marinated artichokes, gorgonzola cheese, roasted red peppers and arugula. Once topped, pizzas will be baked in two minutes. They'll cost about \$7.

The first Blaze location will open mid-July near the campus of UC Irvine. At 2,600 square feet, it will seat up to 90 people. The second will open Sept. 1 in Pasadena, in a space currently occupied by Vroman's Fine Writing, Gifts and Stationary. Both eateries will offer wine and beer and have space for outdoor dining.

Investors backing the Blaze business include Maria Shriver, former first lady of California; film producer John Daves; and Boston Red Sox co-owner Tom Werner. The Wetzels hired L.A. chef Bradford Kent, owner of Olio Pizzeria & Café, to help develop the menu. Even though there are already about 67,000 pizza places open in the United States, Rick Wetzel believes he and Elise have found a niche.

"We stumbled on to these trends of better, healthier eating, and the uprising of fast-casual dining," he said. And while people may grab pizza by the slice for a quick lunch, he believes Blaze will offer a more complete meal.

"Pizza's been predominantly dinner," he said. "We're looking to enter the lunch segment." The Wetzels plan to franchise the restaurant concept shortly after opening the first two.

"I've already gotten franchise leads, but I have to write them back and say, 'Please stand by,'" Rick Wetzel said.

Elise Wetzel also founded iSold It, an eBay drop-off store franchise, which was purchased in 2009 by Greentag Franchise Corp. in Frisco, Texas.