

Tom Werner blazes new pizza path

Sox chairman among backers of chain that makes pies in 2 minutes

October 30, 2012 // Bostonherald.com // By Donna Goodison

Investors including Red Sox [team stats] chairman Tom Werner and Maria Shriver are backing a new California chain serving “fast-fire’d” thin-crust pizza in under two minutes for less than \$7.

Blaze Pizza, which plans to franchise nationally including in Boston, uses an assembly-line approach, pressing out the dough for each customer and allowing them to pick a signature pizza or their own toppings before the 11-inch pies are cooked in open-hearth ovens of 800-plus degrees.

“It’s very similar to Chipotle in terms of speed of service with high-quality food,” president Elise Wetzel said. “You can grab a salad and drink and, by the time you pay, the pizza is ready.”

Wetzel and husband Rick, co-founder of the Wetzel’s Pretzels chain, were at a Chipotle in Pasadena when they thought of the idea. “We were ... watching the line and saying, ‘Why couldn’t you have a pizza place that works like this?’ ” she said. “It was an aha moment. People appreciate quality, and they’re willing to pay a scooch more than fast food for it as long as you deliver in terms of really fresh ingredients ... in a great environment”

The company, which has two pizzerias in Irvine and Pasadena, Calif., has another two Los Angeles area locations under development, with plans for 15-plus in SoCal by the end of 2013.

“We’ve had inquiries from all over the country,” Wetzel said. “When you walk in, there’s not a lot of explaining to do. The execution is really tight.”

Werner learned about Blaze Pizza while visiting movie producer John Davis (“Mr. Popper’s Penguins,” “Gulliver’s Travels,” “Predator”), a backer who also was an early investor in Wetzel’s Pretzels.

“The idea of having pizza and you get it in less than two minutes, and it’s quality — there’s a real opportunity for that,” Werner said. “This place would do extremely well on Newbury Street. I think it’s going to be extremely successful in college communities, too, because the price point is good.”

Werner also is an investor in Boston restaurants Towne, Red Lantern, Gem and Empire, and Shrine at Foxwoods Resort Casino.

“I’m really investing in the people,” Werner said. “Both (Boston restaurateurs) Ed Kane and Patrick Lyons are very talented people, and I feel the same of Rick and Elise