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## Pizza in a flash

**Blaze Pizza is the latest hit in Pasadena's Playhouse District**



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ly of pie parlors in Pasadena may be saying "the more the merrier," but I have to wonder if that welcome comes with a forced smile, the kind given to an unexpected house party guest?

Among an estimated 33 specialty pizza purveyors within city limits, Blaze's one-of-a-kind, fast-fired gourmet operation may be the life of the party.

It looks like the competition is really up against it in trying to match the taste, the quality/price ratio and the convenience that I relished recently in dining on the "red vine," one of Blaze's nine 12-inch signature creations. Thin-crust and absent sauce, it was consumed at lunch but dressed for dinner, topped with basil, chopped garlic and chicken, circumfused in mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses, dotted with cherry tomatoes and sprinkled with olive oil.

After placing the order, priced at \$7.85 (\$6.85 for the basic pizza and \$1 for the added chicken), presto! I was eating it in less than two minutes.

I knew in an instant that something special had just occurred. This unique baking apparatus and their systemized ordering procedure could fill many tall orders in a very short time. Many guests were placing more complex orders than mine — such as "build-your-own," "gluten free" and "extra meat and cheese."

Choices among nine \$6.85 signature pies range from the "meat eater" (crumbled meat balls, pepperoni, red onion, mozzarella and red sauce) to the "veg out" (mushrooms, zucchini, red peppers, mozzarella, red sauce dollops and rich and creamy Gorgonzola).

Among six meat and six cheese choices, with the \$6.85 "build-your-own," diners can select from a combo of three selections, all coming with an unlimited number of veggies, which number 13, and pineapple. If appetites are not merely great but overwhelming, a pie builder can have more meats and cheeses for \$1 each.

But wouldn't the time it takes to order delay the service? Chef Bradford Kent assured me that people will rattle off their choices "once they learn what they like."

Prudence dictates my plan to build a \$6.85er out of a bed of perlini mozzarella (mozz pearls), combined with soft, smooth ricotta, embedded with bell peppers, cherry tomatoes and mushrooms, then firmed up with grilled chicken.

Assembly-line pizza making, which turned out my "red vine" in a blue streak, has three designers: Pasadena residents Elise and Rick Wetzel, co-founders of Wetzel's Pretzels, with 250 outlets worldwide, and Kent, a critically-acclaimed pizza consultant.

"We call Brad the pizza whisperer," said Elise. "He is a super authority on freakishly faster pizza."

From the kitchen to the serving area comes a ball of fresh dough to be flattened on a special press. The dough, its self-rising edges helped along by a feature of the press, forms the mainstay for the ingredients. The disk is slapped on a paddle within arm's length of the order taker, who affixes the written order onto the paddle's handle. Then, after being smeared with sauce or not, the paddle — much like a baton in a sprint relay — is passed on to assistants, who fill the order before handing it off to a slicer/boxer, who calls your name for pickup.



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ken, mozzarella, red peppers, garlic, pesto and arugula), my pal  
pens so soon after something else, it is a wonder that pizza tastes  
for the empowering inferno of the oven and its special rotating  
system that he brought to Blaze. Made of a ceramic composite, the floor temperature of the oven is lower than  
the air temperature above it. Kent indicated that this cooks pizza faster and with more consistency than other  
ovens. With a quick-witted paddler, it can cook up to 10 pizzas at one time.

How did the Wetzel's connect with Kent? "We Googled "pizza consultant,"" said Elise.

So what, exactly, inspired the idea of fast-served pizza? Elise said that she and her husband were having a  
burrito at Chipotle Mexican Grill and they both were impressed by the quick servicing of a good product.

"That's where we cooked up the idea that it might be done with gourmet pizza," she said.

As a result of that influence, guests at Blaze can sit back to enjoy and digest their food. It comfortably seats 90.  
The operation's feel suggests that it could be a model store for national expansion.

Passing by several times in recent days, I've seen crowds so large that one might think that Blaze is the only  
pizza place in town. Yet, due to its location, I think it would court an even wider patronage if it sold pizza by the  
slice. When asked why it doesn't, Kent replied, "We want to keep good relations with our next-door neighbor."

The neighbor?

The Laemmle Playhouse 7 movie theater.

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