

## Blaze Pizza Franchises Its 100-Calorie Slice

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Say goodbye to fattening, double-stuffed-crust pizza. The 100-calorie slice is here, courtesy of a Pasadena, Calif.-based restaurant chain that just announced a major U.S. expansion.

Blaze Pizza is hoping to do for Italian what Chipotle has done for TexMex: Make it cheap, customizable and healthier. So much healthier, in fact, that Blaze's whole 12-inch pie with cheese could practically be a diet food (they slice it into 100-calorie quarters). The secret? Using thin crusts, a healthier cheese-to-crust ratio and unlimited veggies.

Owners Rick and Elise Wetzel credit Chipotle for the inspiration. Over the fast-food chain's chicken burritos one afternoon in 2011, Wetzel recalled they had an a-ha moment. "My wife looked at me and said, 'We're going to open a pizza place.' And I was like 'Here we go!'" Rick Wetzel recalled in a phone conversation with The Huffington Post.

The Wetzels are not strangers to the franchise business. If their name sounds familiar it's because they're the owners of Wetzel's Pretzels, in business since 1990 with 300 locations around the country.

For any burrito lover, the Blaze set-up will be familiar: Customers walk through a line to pick toppings for their own 12-inch pizza, selecting three meats or cheeses and unlimited vegetables all for under \$7. Blaze offers more than 40 toppings to choose from, as well as vegan cheese and gluten-free dough. High-heat open ovens powered with gas cook the crust to a nice, thin crispy base -- and melt the cheese -- in about two minutes. Patrons are in and out the door in around 15 minutes total, said Wetzel.

He says the company is using a classic move from the pizza franchise playbook to find success. Back in the 1980s, Pizza Hut and Domino's were able to expand quickly because of the creation of conveyor ovens that allowed the restaurants to mass-produce pies for the first time. Now, Wetzel is capitalizing on even newer technology for open-hearth ovens -- they look like classic pizza ovens but use gas instead of wood to create the super-hot temperatures essential to cooking a pie quickly.

So far, Blaze Pizza has been a smash hit in Southern California, where the chain's first two locations have been open since August 2012 and are on track to earn \$1 million per year each, Wetzel said. There are four more locations under construction on the West Coast, and last week the company announced plans to develop dozens of locations on the East Coast and in the Midwest.

It's not just customers who have been clamoring for Blaze's slices. So far, Wetzel has attracted big names like Maria Shriver and Boston Red Sox co-owner Tom Werner to invest in the idea. And the company is even talking about a possible IPO in a few years, Bloomberg reported.

The hype around fast-casual restaurants, where customers order at the counter and don't have to tip, comes as sit-down casual restaurants like Chili's and Applebee's are losing business. Overall, sales at fast-casual restaurants increased 8.6 percent in 2011, compared to only 2.8 percent growth at sit-down restaurants, Bloomberg reported.

Blaze's prices -- \$6.85 for a 12-inch pie to call your own -- make it all the more appealing. Wetzel said he's not worried that current spikes in ingredient costs might force him to change his pricing.

But can a low-cal, West Coast slice really cut it in pizza strongholds like New York and New Jersey?

"I understand pizza is polarizing," Wetzel said. "But at the stores operating now we have long lines. We built it for lunch, and it's filling up at dinner."