

## Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza heads east

Lessing's Hospitality Group to bring the fast-casual concept to New York, Connecticut

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Making an early jump from West to East Coast, the Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza chain said Tuesday it has signed an agreement with Lessing's Hospitality Group to open 10 restaurants in the New York metro area and Connecticut.

Blaze was founded last year by Wetzel's Pretzels founder Rick Wetzel and his wife Elise Wetzel. The concept has a number of high-profile investors, including former California First Lady Maria Shriver, movie producer John Davis and Boston Red Sox co-owner Tom Werner.

The chain is also one of a growing number of fast-casual "better pizza" concepts racing to capture the market for build-your-own artisan pies. Others include Uncle Maddio's, Project Pie, Pie Five, MOD Pizza, 800 Degrees, PizzaRev and Pieology.

The agreement with Lessing's is the largest of the franchising deals Blaze has signed so far.

Since launching its franchising program in late 2012, Blaze has signed four agreements, primarily growing the brand around Southern California. One agreement will bring Blaze to Milwaukee and Madison, Wis., where former Panera Bread franchisee John Walch of Walch Hospitality Group LLC plans to open six units.

Blaze operates two corporate-owned locations — in Irvine, Calif., and Pasadena, Calif., — and four franchise locations are under construction in the Los Angeles area, said Rick Wetzel.

Lessing's Hospitality Group plans to bring the Blaze concept to the New York area, including Long Island, Westchester and Rockland counties, as well as southern Connecticut. The company is known for its full-service restaurants in the New York area, including Mirabelle in Stony Brook; View restaurant in Oakdale; Finnegan's in Huntington; Library Café in Farmingdale; Maxwell's in Islip; and Post Office Café in Babylon.

A sixth-generation family-owned operation, Lessing's also has a foodservice management arm, as well as a catering operation and a hotel.

"We believe that Blaze Pizza is well positioned to capture the leadership position in the rapidly emerging build-your-own pizza category," said Michael Lessing, chief operating officer of Lessing's, in a statement. "It's very exciting to be involved in the rollout of a young, well-developed concept, and we know that they value our experience and input."

Wetzel said sales at the two existing locations have been "really strong," though he could not give details. His goal, he said, is to have 20 franchisee agreements signed before the end of 2013 that would likely create a pipeline of about 40 to 60 locations.

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