

Upstart Blaze Pizza opens its third assembly-line location in Torrance

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As Chipotle is to burritos and Panda Express is to Chinese food, Blaze seeks to be to assembly-line, custom-made pizzas for \$5 to \$7.45 that are made in a matter of minutes.

Pasadena-based Blaze Pizza opens its third location Saturday in the former Poquito Mas space at Torrance's Rolling Hills Plaza, the latest entrant to the rapidly growing fast-casual market that's a notch above typical fast-food restaurants.

The nascent chain's goal: to serve a thin crust artisanal personal pizza to customers in about two minutes using blazing hot 900-degree ovens.

Co-owner Rick Wetzel of Wetzels Pretzels fame said the company's first two locations that opened last year in Irvine and Pasadena met with a red-hot reception and the company is poised for rapid expansion.

"We're doing tremendous volumes," he said. "We're getting lines out to the curb seven days a week for lunch and dinner. It's a concept whose time has come.

"My wife and I came up with the idea," he added. "We were out looking for lunch one day and all we could find was pizza by the slice. We ended up at Chipotle and said, 'Y'know, we could do this with pizza.' "

Blaze Pizza has several competitors plowing a similar furrow.

They include Los Angeles-based 800 degrees, which will open a location in the newly renovated Tom Bradley International Terminal at Los Angeles International Airport and Fullerton-based Project Pie.

But like El Segundo-based Rock & Brews, which has ambitious expansion plans backed by two founding members of rock band KISS, Blaze Pizza counts the likes of Maria Shriver, basketball star LeBron James and Boston Red Sox co-owner Tom Werner among its investors.

The Torrance restaurant is the first of 20 Southern California locations planned by franchisee Peter Koral, founder of premium denim brand "Seven for All Mankind." The company also plans stores in Culver City and The Grove at Farmers Market in the Fairfax District.

"It's the next big thing," said Chris Heyman, vice president of operations for the company opening the Torrance store. "We really believe that we will be the front-runners nationally because of the group they have behind it. ... Blaze will be the big guns (in the category) in the next two or three years."

That team includes interior designer Ana Henton of Los Angeles' MASS Architecture and Design, the company responsible for the interiors of upscale Intellegentsia Coffee. Chef Bradford Kent, owner of Zagat-rated Olio Pizza & Cafe in Los Angeles, created the recipe for the dough, which requires a 24-hour fermentation period to produce what the company describes as "lighter-than-air" crust.

The pizzas are washed down with craft beers and customers can order online for takeout or head to an outdoor patio to eat.

The 65-seat Torrance store has 30 to 35 employees.

Blaze Pizza's Facebook fans can get a free pizza from 5 p.m. until the restaurant closes on Tuesday. Next Saturday, the store features fire dancers, free giveaways and a special appearance of the Batmobile.