

SMALL BUSINESS

A piece of the fast-casual pie

PizzaRev gearing up for franchises on Long Island

By KYLE BARR

When looking for pizza places on Long Island on Google Maps, the number of red dots looks like Long Island came down with a severe case of chickenpox.

Pizza is such a fixture in New York but along with the fast-casual movement that has companies renovating the idea of quick burritos and hamburgers into a more limited, healthier option, pizza is now on that growing list. PizzaRev, a fast-casual pizza company, is one of them, opening four franchises on Long Island with the first restaurant set to open in March.

"There is a foundation of good pizza on Long Island. I think that people are going to embrace us," said Mike Tochluk, the operator of the new Long Island PizzaRev stores. "There is plenty of room to grow here."

While New Yorkers love to rave about their pizza being the best in the nation, pizza is pervasive in the diverse American palate. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported in 2014 that, overall, 13 percent of the nation's population over the age of 2 consumed pizza on any given day.

In a new move for the California company, PizzaRev has franchised its business to the New York area, and the first store will open mid-March at 408 Jericho Turnpike in Syosset. The other stores are set to open in the Green Acres Mall in Valley Stream, the Tanger Outlets in Deer Park and on Motor Parkway in Hauppauge. The new stores promise the ability for customers to personalize a pizza for a fixed price and cook it quickly, in under three minutes, using a 900 degree oven.

"It allows us to grow throughout the country and lets us attract high-quality franchisers," said Nicholas Eckerman, the co-founder and COO of PizzaRev.

Tochluk is partnered with Alan Shearer and Chuck Kwon. All three people formally helped operate Buffalo Wild Wings on Long Island. They had come across PizzaRev at a Buffalo Wild Wings Conference due to the strategic partnership that PizzaRev had entered into 2013.

"There is a need for pizza in this cat-



Photo by Bob Gigliore

MIKE TOCHLUK: There's plenty of room for growth on Long Island.

egory," Eckerman said. "It has a simple pricing model and we can source local, high quality ingredients."

Tochluk and his partners have an exclusive agreement for the Long Island area and the deal allows them to open at least eight PizzaRevs in the territory of Suffolk, Nassau and Queens.

The fast-casual trend started in the 1990s as a reaction to McDonald's and Wendy's with the introduction of establishments like Fuddruggers. Now franchises like Chipotle and Five Guys Burgers and Fries are constantly growing their number of establishments. Chipotle reported having 1,595 restaurants nationally in 2013, up from 1,410 in 2012.

By comparison, Long Island has been fashionably late to the fast-casual party.

"By 2009, we started seeing Chipotles popping up," said Tom Scarda, the owner of FranChoice, a Wantagh-based franchise consulting firm. "Eventually, we'll see one

of [these fast casual restaurants] in every town on Long Island."

For the past several years fast-casual restaurants have seen an increase in traffic. The NPD Group last reported that fast-casual restaurants in 2013 had 8 percent more traffic from the previous year.

"When you start to see some of the biggest restaurants adapt to the ideas of fast casual, you can call it a market victory," Eckerman said.

The fast-casual pizza isn't so much a reaction to the low-quality fast food that restaurants like Chipotle and Five Guys were, but more focused the desire for a personalized lunch that is both organic, quick and all for a fixed price. Some people, like Scarda, bemoan pizzerias that sometimes force a person to buy multiple pies to get every ordering person their slice and topping of choice.

"When you take the family out to a regular pizza place, after toppings and everything like that, you could be paying \$10 a

head," Scarda said.

"There is a need for pizza in [the fast-casual] category," Tochluk said. "Most other places are generally about a dinner offering. We're a half-lunch, half-dinner kind of place."

Scarda said that the quick, customizable pizza offering is especially appealing to millennials who are looking for quick, relatively healthy options, especially around lunch time.

"Pizzerias are the No. 1 most-eaten-at food place in the nation, it's ubiquitous," Scarda said. "Now we're seeing the personal pizza thing. There are 3 million people who live here. Long Island is a bubble for restaurants like these."

At the time of this article, PizzaRev is still hiring for all of its proposed stores to open in 2016. The exact date of the new store to open in March is yet to be determined.

■ KYLE.BARR@LIBN.COM