



Wood-Fired Delight

AJ's Fine Foods delivers the pizzeria experience

INSIGHT FOR BAKERY, DELI AND FOODSERVICE



Wood-Fired

DELIGHT

AJ's Fine Foods Brings the Pizzeria Instore.

by Joanie Spencer

Imagine ordering a slice of five-cheese pizza at the instore deli, and it's bigger than the plate it's served on. Baked in a wood-fired oven with toasted cheese oozing over the sides, it folds in half, revealing a perfectly golden, warm crust—a crust with a hint of olive oil that keeps you captured to the very last bite.

This is the customer experience at the Italian Kitchen in Phoenix-based AJ's Fine Foods. The pizza is beyond the typical instore, and it lives up to the company's gourmet market format. And Chef Mario Martinez, AJ's corporate executive chef and director of bistros and boulangeries, is in the market of delivering top-quality, gourmet pizzas in every one of AJ's Italian Kitchens.

Martinez brings a lifetime of experience dedicated to culinary education, ethnic fare and of course, pizza to AJ's Fine Foods. In addition to being a 37-year veteran of the restaurant business, Martinez grew

up in the heart of American pizza's birthplace—Brooklyn, New York. "When it comes to pizza, I was raised on the real deal," he says.

According to research company Mintel, specialty foods, defined as being unique, high-quality and even exotic, are on the rise, and Americans are citing taste as the most important factor when purchasing. And Italian fare is in consumers' top three ethnic food preferences, according to *What's in Store 2009* from the International Dairy-Deli-Bake Association.

Martinez identifies four key factors in creating an unforgettable pizza: crust, oven, sauce and toppings, and staff.

THE CRUST OF THE MATTER

The crust is, in Martinez's opinion, the most important factor in making a pizza.

AJ's pizzas are scratch-made in-house, and the process begins with the dough—a day before the

pizza ever comes near the oven. "You can't make dough and then five minutes later make a pizza," Martinez says. "Well, you can, but it won't be very good."

The process begins with kneading the dough with a dough hook in an electric mixer. Proper kneading gives the dough the desirable chew and also the right amount of crispiness. Classic pizza crust isn't too doughy, Martinez says. It has to have the right chew, crispiness and pull, and achieving this starts with kneading.

The dough is then seamed, a technique in which it is stretched and twisted into a tight consistency with no seams.

Retarding the dough slows the fermentation process to allow for the extended development of flavor. "That's the key to the pizza-making process," Martinez says. It develops the dough's both flavor and texture.

On the day the pizza is baked,



the dough is stretched once it reaches room temperature. It's pushed out by hand, stretched and lastly tossed. Although stretching the dough involves showmanship and is fun for the customers to watch, there is purpose to it. "The centrifugal force of the spinning stretches the dough without tearing it," Martinez says. Once the dough stretched, it should be nearly translucent. You should be able to hold it up and see light come through.

It takes about two hours to bring the heat back up to around 700°. But again, unlike conventional ovens, there is no

IN THE OVEN

The oven is a key player in making a pizza that has AJ's level of quality. In AJ's Italian kitchen, you will find an actual wood-fire brick oven. Although this kind of oven is expensive and labor-intensive, it's well worth it to create a truly authentic pizza. The oven holds the heat evenly and also adds to the flavor—which is due in part to burning oak.

The oven's fire is started early in the morning. But unlike an electric

set temperature. A pie could bake perfectly at 700° one day, but burn at the about same temperature the next.

All the factors of AJ's pizzas—crust, ovens sauce and toppings—are completed by impassioned pizzaiolos.

or gas oven, it's not something that turns on and off, so the heat never really goes away. In fact, if an oven gets cold, it could take many hours to heat back up, costing a day's worth of pizzas.

Wood is thrown on for the embers to burn overnight, and the temperature remains at about 500°. In the morning,

TOPPING IT OFF

When it comes to sauce, Martinez belongs to the "less is more" school of thought. Too much of a good thing exists.

AJ's pizza sauce, made with a signature seasoning blend, is not too sweet, and it's not too heavy on top of the crust. It's too much sauce, Martinez says, will not only overwhelm the pizza's flavor, but it also will cause the toppings to slide off the top. Sauce is the key balancing factor for the entire pie.

When it comes to toppings, there is no skipping at AJ's. Customers can either order a specialty or hand-tossed pie with a choice of toppings including artichokes, spinach, sausage and pineapple just to name a few.

THE PIZZAIOLO TOUCH

No step of the process is possible without the pizzaiolos in AJ's Italian Kitchen. From firing up the brick ovens first thing in the morning to crafting the dough, pizzaiolos put their signature on every slice. There is a requisite relationship between pizzaiolo and product.

"AJ's pizza is an artisan product. It's hand-made in a traditional method, and it requires expertise," Martinez says. He hires based passion and commitment and expertise. "The point of differentiation at AJ's is our intellectual capital," Martinez says. "I hire staff that are not only passionate, but who are also dedicated to an exceptional culinary experience."

The Italian Kitchen at AJ's Fine Foods can be found in most of their 14 Arizona stores. ■