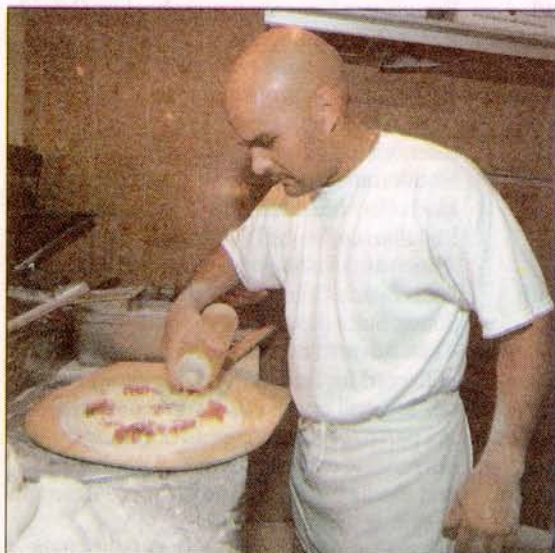




EYE ON THE PIE



PHOTOS MARK FREERKS



Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza's pies will be the same at all locations. Right: Anthony's president Nick Castaldo, and founder Anthony Bruno say some pizza consumers will always want the upscale pie.

Entrepreneur plans 15 South Florida restaurants

BY KATE HOWELL

It's 1:30 p.m. on a Wednesday and chefs yank pie after pie from the oven at the original Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza in Fort Lauderdale. The procedure is duplicated at the small chain's six South Florida stores and likely will go unchanged for the three restaurants under construction in Palm Beach County.

Once Anthony's reaches its goal of 15 South Florida stores by the end of 2009, founder Anthony Bruno says his pizza will be unaltered by expansion. The ovens will continue to burn coal, the menu will stay simple and, hopefully, the customers will stay satisfied.

"It's the pizza. It's all about putting out a good pizza," Bruno said.

When Bruno – a New York City transplant who owns another Italian restaurant, Runway 84 – moved to South Florida, he was frustrated by his inability to find the kind of crispy, flavorful pizza he'd eaten in the city and recommend places to customers. From that frustration sprang Anthony's and – spurred by word-of-mouth – it took off.

"When you have a quality product, it kind of takes care of itself," Bruno said.

But there's a big difference between running one pizza place and running six. That's where football celebrity and Anthony's partner Dan Marino – who put up the funds for the second store – and long-time restaurant businessman and Anthony's President Nick Castaldo came in.

"I could tell very early on that his would be a success," Castaldo said, adding that while many restaurants struggle to widen menus – and, as a result, become more and more like one another – Anthony's had a very tight focus.

"We have a very clear sense of what we have and

ANTHONY'S COAL FIRED PIZZA

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what we do," he said.

What they do is clear from their menu – which fits easily on a single sheet of paper with plenty of white space left over. Pizza is the centerpiece, complemented by a single type of salad and dressing, roasted chicken wings and two types of focaccia sandwiches.

The pies are cooked on coal – rather than the cheaper wood used at many specialty pizza parlors – which burns hotter and gives the pizza smoky, charcoal-laced flavor. Italian immigrants popularized the technique in New York, where it flourishes today. Even Anthony's wings are cooked over coal. There's not a deep fryer in the place.

THE KEY TO SUCCESS

This straightforward approach is key to the chain's success, said Lane Cardwell, a veteran of the food world who sits on the boards of five restaurant companies.

"They don't try to do too much," he said, comparing Anthony's handling of pizza to Houston's handling of steaks. "It gives you a clearer focus of what they stand for. A lot of pizza companies get diffused as they expand into pasta and salads.

Anthony's takes pride in its higher prices – \$10.75 to \$17.25 for a small pizza. The store averages \$2 million in store volume for each 28,000-square-foot location.

There's always going to be a segment of pizza consumers that will trade up for the better thing," Castaldo said.

Anthony's also prides itself on attracting and keeping excellent managers by paying them a share of the in-store profits to give them a slice of ownership, and generally treating their employees well – a strategy Bruno said he picked up from his restaurateur father as a child.

"We pay well, we get good people, we get good pizza," he said. "Take care of your help. If they're not happy, they're not producing and nobody's happy."

So, despite a few bumps in the road – a tight real estate market saturated by Italian restaurants, for one – the chain seems fired up for expansion.

They plan is to keep building Anthony's as a regional brand and expanding to contiguous markets. One day, it may expand to other states, something Cardwell can see in the next 10 years.

"I think their growth strategy's been right on target," he said.

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THE CHALLENGES

- Finding sites when most established shopping centers have an Italian restaurant and leases often protect them from competition.

- Pizza chains often become blander as they expand.

- Being out-priced by other chains.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Build in new plazas, convert standalones and be flexible.

- Stay simple. Focus on a few things and do them well.

- Focus on the customers willing to pay a little more.