

RETAIL

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TREASURE COAST

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Upper crust

New gourmet pizzerias cater to wealthier patrons, focusing on quality instead of price.

By JEFF OSTROWSKI
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Local pizza lovers' palates and pocketbooks are used to cheap eats from Pizza Hut, Papa John's and Domino's.

But will we buy gourmet pies piled with exotic toppings and costing as much as \$150? Rival restaurateurs are peppering Palm Beach County with pricey pizzerias, convinced the answer is yes.

"Just like people go to Starbucks and pay \$5 for a cup of coffee, they come to our restaurant and pay \$20 or \$30 for a good pizza," says Eric Haley, spokesman for Pizza Fusion, a Fort Lauderdale-based chain that's expanding aggressively.

Among the pizzerias vying for our cash:

■ **Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza.** It has opened locations in Palm Beach Gardens, Delray Beach and Boca Raton in recent months and plans restaurants in Boynton Beach and Stuart.

■ **Pizza Fusion.** The chain plans to open this week in Palm Beach Gardens, its first Palm Beach County location. It also plans stores in Boca Raton, Jupiter and Wellington. Its surf-and-turf pie sells for \$48.

■ **Coal Mine Pizza.** The Boca Raton pizzeria serves pies topped with white truffles for \$150, while black-truffle pizzas go for \$60. Coal Mine plans new locations in Broward County, Orlando and Tampa, General Manager Steve Lieber says.

■ **One-store pizzerias** such as Fire Rock Coal Fired Pizza on Clematis Street in West Palm Beach and Steve's Wood Fired Pizza west of Boca Raton.

See PIZZA, 6F ▶



CHRIS MATULA/Staff Photographer

Disappointed in the quality of pizza in Florida, Brooklyn native Anthony Bruno founded Anthony's

Coal Fired Pizza. His pies don't come cheap, but he's banking on patrons' preference for taste.

Even pricey pies resist recession

► PIZZA from 1F

While each pizza place delivers a slightly different flavor, all build on a common theme: Discerning diners have strayed from mediocre pizza but can be wooed back by fresh ingredients and superior pies.

"South Florida has always been a strong restaurant market, but it's lacked in the pizza department," Haley says. "There's only been a few places you could go to get a quality pizza."

Quality is a word seldom associated with this industry, which brings in \$35 billion a year — or \$116 from every American man, woman and child. The big pizza purveyors' ad blitzes focus on price.

But that approach is anathema to Anthony Bruno, the Brooklyn native who founded Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza. He was so disappointed by the pizza here that he started his own pizzeria.

Bruno is a veteran restaurateur who opened his first coal-oven pizzeria in Fort Lauderdale in 2002. After that store was a hit, Bruno assembled a team of experienced executives and began scouting locations, first in Broward County, then in Palm Beach.

At Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza, the pies are cooked for only a few minutes in an oven where the temperature tops 800 degrees. The result is a crispy crust tinged black. Signs in the dining room read, "Warning: Our Pizza Is Well Done."

A large pizza with one topping costs \$16.25, and specialty pies such as the Eggplant Marino — named for Dan Marino, the Dolphins great who's an investor in the chain — cost \$18.75.

Unlike the national chains, Bruno doesn't pursue people looking for cheap pie. Rather, he targets patrons who want taste and quality.

"No freezers, no fryers, no microwaves — we make it, then we sell it," Bruno said during a tour of the kitchen at his Delray Beach restaurant.

Anthony's doesn't make deliveries, and the dark-wood decor defies the stereotype of a pizzeria filled with Formica counters and vinyl tablecloths. Still, Bruno is a traditionalist, so don't expect to find goat cheese on the list of toppings.

For goat cheese — not to mention shrimp scampi and barbecue chicken — pizza lovers can visit Steve's Wood Fired Pizza.

The veteran of Palm Beach County's gourmet pizza market, Steve's has been in business since 1999.

Owner Steve Greenberg said he launched his restaurant to give affluent diners a reason to buy pizza.

"They live in nice houses, they drive nice cars," he says. "Their eating style represents who they are."

Pizza Fusion, which boasts all-natural ingredients and serves organic salads, organic beer and organic wine, likewise serves up exotic toppings. There's even gluten-free pizza for diners who suffer wheat allergies.

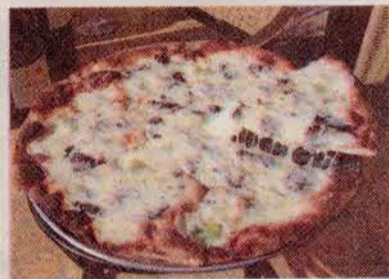
As anyone who has shopped at Whole Foods Market knows, organic food doesn't come cheap. At Pizza Fusion, a large pizza with one topping costs \$21, and prices soar as high as \$48 for the Surf & Turf, a pizza topped with organic New York strip steak and ocean-caught shrimp and lobster.

Where Anthony's shoots for an Old World feel, Pizza Fusion aims for an ambience that's bright and eco-friendly. Drivers deliver food in hybrid



STEVE MITCHELL/Staff Photographer

Ashley Rathgeber works at Pizza Fusion in Palm Beach Gardens, a green eatery that sells organic pies. With its eco-friendly theme, the restaurant tries to appeal to both pizza lovers and environmentalists.



Coal Mine Pizza in Boca Raton serves pies topped with white truffles for \$150, while black-truffle pizzas go for \$60. New locations will open in Broward, Tampa and Orlando.

Pizza party

Gourmet pizza suddenly is all the rage in Palm Beach County. We visited four upscale pizzerias and found all offered crispy crusts and efficient service. Among the nuances:

■ **The pizzeria:** Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza.

Local locations: Palm Beach Gardens, Delray Beach, Boca Raton.

Coming soon: Boynton Beach, Stuart.

The vibe: Dark wood gives an Old World feel. Menu is traditional Italian-style.

The tab: \$16.25 for a large pie with one topping. \$18.75 for specialty pizzas such as the Eggplant-Marino (as in Dan Marino, an investor).

■ **The pizzeria:** Pizza Fusion.

Local locations: Palm Beach Gardens, Deerfield Beach.

Coming soon: Jupiter, Wellington, Boca Raton.

The vibe: Eco-friendly. Many of the ingredients are organic, as are the salads, beer and wine.

The tab: \$21 for a large pie with one topping. \$48 for the Surf & Turf, which includes organic steak and ocean-caught shrimp and lobster.

■ **The pizzeria:** Fire Rock Coal Fired Pizza.

Location: West Palm Beach.

The vibe: Casual chic. At Clematis and Flagler, Fire Rock overlooks the Intracoastal Waterway.

The tab: \$18.95 for a large pie with several toppings.

■ **The pizzeria:** Steve's Wood Fired Pizza.

Location: Suburban Boca Raton.

The vibe: Laid-back decor, vibrant menu. Pizza toppings include artichoke, shrimp scampi, goat cheese, pineapple and barbecue chicken.

The tab: \$16.99 for a 10-inch pie topped with shrimp scampi.

Source: *Palm Beach Post* reporting

cars, and its new location on PGA Boulevard would make a tree-hugger proud. There's no water heater (excess heat from the pizza ovens warms the water) and toilets are flushed with rerouted dishwater. Counters are made from recycled glass, and the plastic silverware is biodegradable, the better to keep it from clogging landfills.

The green theme, Haley says, means Pizza Fusion appeals to vegetarians and environmentalists.

It's not just burgeoning chains that are jumping on the gourmet pizza bandwagon. Fire Rock Coal Fired Pizza serves upscale pies from a high-end location at the corner of Flagler Drive and Clematis Street in downtown West Palm Beach. It charges \$18.95 for a large pie, and like Anthony's it uses a superheated oven to bake crispy pies.

Consumers aren't scared off by the higher prices at the gourmet pizzerias, said John Ries, the owner of Fire Rock.

"Maybe the \$5 pizza from Pizza Hut or Domino's isn't the best way I can spend my money," Ries says. "People

will pay for value."

Dave Ostrander, a Michigan-based pizza consultant, said the Starbucks analogy applies to the flood of upscale pizzerias.

"People will remember a really good pizza, just like they remember a really good cup of coffee, and they'll tell their friends about it," Ostrander says.

But with Florida's economy in a downturn, are consumers really willing to pony up for pricey pizza?

"We're in a time when things are looking a little iffy," says Bruno, the Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza founder. Yet the moribund economy hasn't slowed his expansion plans.

"Our sales are up significantly," he says.

Jeremy White, editor of the trade publication *Pizza Today*, isn't surprised. During tough times, a family might skip dinner at a steakhouse and go out for pizza instead — and even if the pizza costs \$25, it's cheaper than prime rib for four.

"Typically, the pizza business doesn't feel the pinch of the recession," White says. ©jeff_ostrowski@pbpost.com