

>> Founded in 2006, Pizza Fusion is dedicated to using organic and locally grown ingredients, but says its pizzas are only one part of its commitment to sustainability.

Purposeful Pizza

Pizza Fusion's goal is to make the best all-organic pizzas it can while also being environmentally responsible in its operations. **By Chris Petersen**

Up until now, pizza didn't have much responsibility. It was expected to provide us only with the occasional lunch, dinner or – if you're a college student – breakfast. However, Pizza Fusion co-founders Vaughan Lazar and Michael Gordon have given everyone's favorite carry-out food a much higher purpose: to save the planet.

It may sound impossible, but Vaughan says Pizza Fusion is committed to making the world a better place, one pizza at a time. What started out as an idea tossed out during a brainstorming session has become a full-fledged organic pizza chain with 17 locations and growing. What makes Pizza Fusion different is its commitment to environmental responsibility and organic food, which can be seen in everything about the company from its menu to its employee uniforms to its hybrid delivery cars.

Vaughan says the idea started as an off-hand comment made while he and Gordon were looking for a way to go into business together. Neither of them had

any restaurant experience, but they knew organic food was a growing segment of the market. The only problem, as they saw it, was that there were very few options for eating out organically. Almost as a joke, the idea of organic pizza delivered by hybrid cars was developed, but the partners soon realized they had stumbled onto something with real potential.

"It started out as a funny little comment, but it became that 'ah-ha' moment," Vaughan says. Soon, the two began working on ideas for an organic pizza chain that was also as sustainable as possible.

"It became almost a contest between Michael and I to see what we could do to make the store a little more socially and environmentally responsible," Vaughan says.

company profile

Pizza Fusion

www.pizzafusion.com

2008 sales: \$60 million

HQ: Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Employees: 500

Specialty: Organic pizza

Vaughan Lazar, president/co-

founder: "[We wanted] to see what we could do to make the store a little more responsible."

Refining the Recipe

Running with the idea, Vaughan and Gordon opened their first store in 2006 with a menu of pizzas, salads and sandwiches made from organically grown and locally sourced ingredients. Over time, Vaughan says, the company expanded the menu to cater to a wide variety of dietary needs, making Pizza Fusion one of the few restaurant chains to feature menu items specifically created for vegan, lactose-intolerant and wheat-allergic customers. Vaughan says the ideas for all of these options came directly from the company's customers.

"We didn't even know what gluten-free was when we first opened up," he says, but now Pizza Fusion offers a gluten-free crust on all of its pizzas. Other menu innovations include soy cheese for vegan customers. Vaughan, a self-described "carnivore," says the company took the time to find a soy cheese that would satisfy

vegans and those who don't follow a vegan diet. "If I like this, it has to be amazing," he says.

Both being neophytes to the restaurant business, Vaughan says he and Gordon had no preconceived notions about what people would or would not eat, making it much easier for them to implement their customers' suggestions. "You have to listen to customers," Vaughan says.

A Greener Pizza Joint

Pizza Fusion is also saving money in ways that contribute toward saving the environment. The design of each new Pizza Fusion location incorporates new green features as they become available.

To begin with, Pizza Fusion locations feature construction materials that are locally sourced or reclaimed from construction waste. Countertops are made from recycled concrete slabs, and bamboo is used whenever possible. Low-

flow sinks and other fixtures reduce water usage, while compact fluorescent and LED lighting increase each store's energy efficiency. Vaughan says heat exchangers have been installed on pizza ovens to heat water, meaning no electricity is used for hot water.

Pizza Fusion's menus are printed on 100 percent post-consumer recycled paper, using soy-based inks. Employees wear organic cotton uniforms, and even the stores' insulation is made from recycled blue jeans.

The company's menu and message aren't confined to the United States, either. Vaughan says Pizza Fusion is developing plans to expand into Europe, beginning with the United Kingdom, and is already preparing to open one store in Saudi Arabia. "We want to continue to be at the forefront of socially and environmentally responsible restaurants," Vaughan says. **FD**

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Quality Ingredients

The restaurant also uses the finest products, DiMizio adds. This includes Grande brand mozzarella cheese, which DiMizio describes as the best mozzarella cheese available. When it comes to ingredients – including Grande, Stanislaus Food Products and Delco Foods – money is no object to Luca Pizza di Roma.

“It’s one of the most expensive kinds of mozzarella, but we don’t look at the price of the ingredients,” DiMizio says. “We look at the quality, and we use the best stuff we can find.”

Aside from using the best ingredients available and employing traditional recipes, DiMizio also boasts about his restaurant’s product variety. Luca Pizza di Roma not only has numerous pizza offerings, but it also has complementary items like lasagnas, calzones and breadsticks. “Calzones are very popular in

Indianapolis, and we have six or seven choices of calzones,” he adds.

DiMizio says the company also is considering bringing a new product to the United States that already has made waves in Europe. Luca Pizza di Roma is in discussions with Coneinn, which manufactures ready-made meals and snacks in cone form.

The recession is taking its toll on the retail industry, and because most of Luca Pizza di Roma restaurants are located within malls, the company is feeling the pinch. So, DiMizio says the restaurant wants to expand to stand-alone locations that will offer diner-like amenities such as servers, beer and wine selections, and take-out and delivery services.

“The market is changing, so we are looking at expanding out of the malls to busy roads with more visibility,” DiMizio says. “The bigger malls are hanging in there, but

the small malls are suffering more.”

The difference between stand-alone locations and mall restaurants is the amount of foot traffic restaurants can produce. DiMizio says foot traffic is automatic at a mall, while stand-alone restaurants need to be located along busy thoroughfares to grab market share.

However, he believes the Luca Pizza di Roma name is familiar enough to bring customers into these locations, as well as support a delivery service. This expansion plan will take the company outside of the malls within the next five to seven years, DiMizio says.

“In the malls, people go to the food court looking for something for lunch or dinner, so you need something with eye appeal,” he says. “Out on the street, you have to be a destination place. People can’t drive around and look at the food, so you have to have your name out there and provide a great experience.” **FD**



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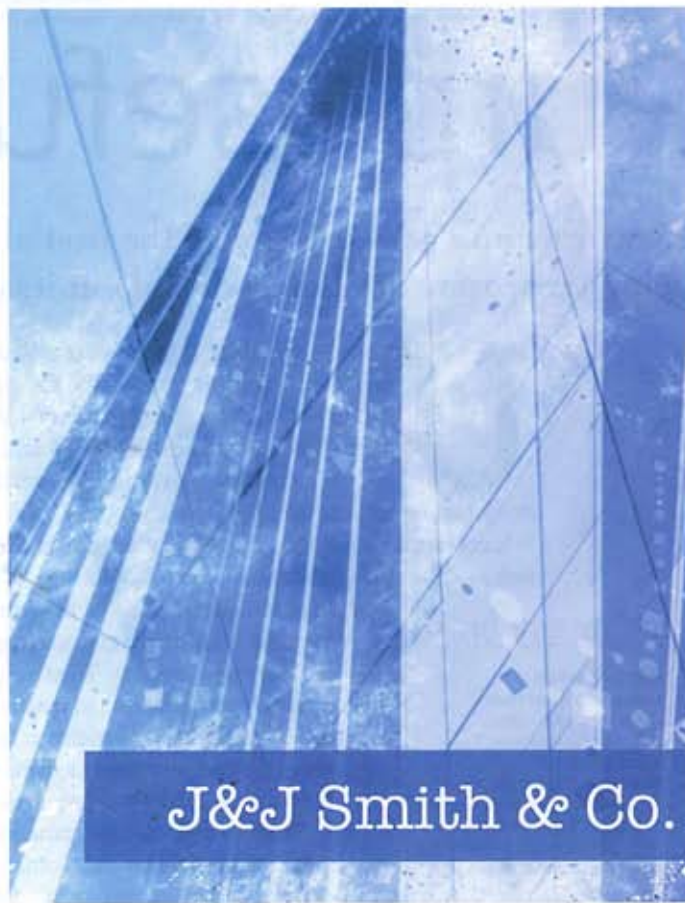
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