

organic offerings

By Victoria J. Schoenke



Organic pizzerias are taking the nation by storm.

With the consumer trend toward organic and local foods growing daily, you may be wondering if it's time to join the movement. Offering organic and locally grown ingredients while working to reduce your environmental impact has plenty of benefits for both you and your customers. Consequently, organic pizzerias, as well as pizzerias that offer local ingredients, are popping up all over the country. We talked to pizzeria owners across North America—from

burgeoning chains to one-location independents—to find out how going organic has worked for them.

Getting On the Green Bandwagon

Pizza Fusion (www.pizzafusion.com) owners Michael Gordon and Vaughan Lazar began their pizzeria franchise in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, to address the need for a restaurant that catered to their, and others', organic diets and increasing



Rocky Mountain Flatbread owners believe that serving organic ingredients is the best thing they can do for the health of their customers.

organic ingredients helps its community and customers. "We are providing food that people can feel good about eating and also tastes great," notes Megan Duni, American Flatbread marketing programs manager. "On a larger scale, we're helping the community by supporting sustainable agriculture, linking the network from farm to plate."

Sid Fanarof, founder of Newport Beach, California-based zpizza (www.zpizza.com), a chain of pizzerias that stretches across the country, says he chooses organics because they reflect the consciousness of his company. "We're considerate of healthy food and the environment," he explains. "We want to be a conscientious brand."

Rocky Mountain Flatbread (www.rockymountainflatbread.ca) owner Suzanne Fielden, with her husband Dominic, owns two pizzerias in western Canada, one in Canmore, Alberta, and the other in Vancouver, British Columbia. "Our policy is to buy local organic first, local second and then organic abroad," she says.

"The No. 1 reason is for the health of our customers, in regard to pesticides we're ingesting. The No. 2 reason is taste. Organic local foods are so much more flavorful. Third, we want to support local organic farming and local food production."

Save Money and Mother Earth

It's no secret that organic ingredients usually cost more than their nonorganic counterparts. If you're interested in making the switch, here are a few points to keep in mind: Start small, keep it simple, shop around and educate your customers.

environmental awareness. "It made sense in terms of their values," says Eric Haley, vice president of communications for Pizza Fusion. "They wanted to serve a product that is not only premium in quality but healthy for the customer." Pizza Fusion is 75% organic, and all of its franchises across the country are LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)-certified, which means each building must meet certain criteria that mark the building as environmentally sustainable.

American Flatbread (www.americanflatbread.com), a pizzeria chain based in Waitsfield, Vermont, believes that offering

Switching to local and organic products can seem like a daunting task. But starting small—for instance, changing one ingredient—can get the ball rolling. Decide where you want to make the switch. If you consider dough to be your pizza's most important component, then consider switching to organic flour. If your specialty is sauce, then spend more on sauce ingredients. Zpizza uses as many organic ingredients as possible. "Take little steps wherever you can, wherever it improves your product," recommends Fanarof. "While organic flour costs twice as much as regular flour, it's only a small percentage of our total cost, so I pick my battles."

Keeping your menu simple is another key to keeping costs down. "If your pizzeria offers a wide variety of menu items," Fielden explains, "it's going to be very difficult to keep your food costs down." Fielden holds costs down by keeping the decor at her two restaurants simple and putting more money into quality local and organic ingredients. "We don't have a flashy dining area," she says. "While it's very cheerful with art and colorful walls, we keep it extremely basic and clean, so instead of spending millions in the front, we spend it on our food."

Get the best deals on organic and local ingredients by shopping around. Simply call your distributor or get in touch with local farmers and farmers markets to price ingredients. To get started, Fanarof recommends pricing specific ingredients. "Finding quality ingredients is just a job you have to do," he explains. "Look to different distributors and suppliers to get the best deal." Fanarof notes that because of the volume of food he



The twin sister owners of Slice agree that customers are willing to pay more for quality ingredients.

orders, he sometimes receives a better deal simply by asking for one. "I use a certain lettuce, and because of the volume I order, I get organic lettuce at a nonorganic price."

Even with these cost-cutting strategies, pizzerias that offer organic and local products often charge more for their pizzas, but many health-conscious consumers are more than willing to pay for quality ingredients. Miki Agrawal, founder of Slice (www.sliceperfect.com) in New York, offers as many organic and all-natural ingredients as possible in her pizzeria and admits the price gap. "Organic dairy is about three times more expensive

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than regular," Agrawal notes. "Since our product costs us more, we have to charge more, but people understand that."

Duni agrees. "We have earned consumers' trust. People feel good about buying our pizza, and even about paying a premium price for it."

Step by Step

Because switching to local and organic ingredients can be an expensive proposition and will cause you to increase prices, it's important to know whether your demographic will support the changes. "Our market is families and foodies," says Fielden. "They're willing to pay for organics, and local and flavorful food. If yours is the \$1-a-slice crowd, then they're not going to buy it."

Educating yourself, your customers and the community about the benefits of eating locally grown and organic foods can create a market to sustain your cost increases. "More people are educating themselves and improving their food sources," says Duni. "In these cases, we've found that people are willing to pay more for what they see as 'better.'"

"Education is a very important aspect of carrying organics," agrees Haley. "Organic consumers are very educated and intelligent. You need to have serving and product knowledge. We receive many inquiries about our food providers and our environmental impact."

Indeed, if you're on the road to going green, you'll also want to start minimizing your environmental impact. Thankfully, there are plenty of easy steps you can take to do so. Pizza Fusion has become a role model for earth-friendly pizzerias, with numerous environmentally conscious decisions: purchasing Green-e-certified renewable energy certificates, delivering food using hybrid cars, using eco-friendly cleaners and providing biodegradable utensils.

Zpizza is currently in the process of changing its containers to a more eco-friendly brand. "The new ones are being made out of compostable material," says Fanarof. "I shopped around for the materials, and because the new containers aren't made of plastic, I'm getting them for less money."

Agrawal says she strives to make her pizzeria as earth-conscious as possible by offering recycled-material pizza boxes and "having a store interior comprised of sustainable materials, such as bamboo walls, reclaimed steel and found materials."

Rocky Mountain composts and uses low-energy light bulbs; the distributor of its frozen flatbread pizzas use biodiesel trucks to deliver.

Marketing the Green

Marketing organic and local ingredients can be as simple as educating your customers on the health and environmental benefits of eating organic and local foods. Do this with tastings and trials, wait staff word of mouth, and signage and menu descriptions. Because Slice is considered healthier than the average pizza, Agrawal offers tastings to locales of the health-conscious: gyms, sports clubs and yoga centers. Distributing samples in front of the restaurant make it hard for passersby to resist. "People walk by, try it and always come back," says Agrawal. "People are skeptical of what it's going to taste like since it's 'healthy,' so tasting makes all the difference."

Rocky Mountain Flatbread markets its pizzas by "shouting about using local and organic produce, and working through a network of conservation and environmental organizations," says Fielden.

"We've found that trials work for us," explains Fanarof. "When our customers receive a mailing or an e-mail about a new product, they're very excited about it. Our trials are substantial; for example, if there's a new pizza, we might give away a small size for free."

Offering diet-selective menu items like gluten-free pizzas is another way to bring in a specific consumer. "We also offer a gluten-free crust," continues Fanarof. "And all of our employees are certified with the Celiac Disease Foundation."

Slice offers nondairy cheeses for vegan and lactose-intolerant customers, as well as gluten-free rice crusts. Pizza Fusion holds specific promotions for vegans and people who don't eat gluten.

You can also try offering eco-friendly incentives for customers to generate business. Pizza Fusion offers its customers 25 cents for every pizza box they return so that the pizzeria can then recycle the recyclable box parts. It also offers discounts to hybrid car drivers.

Educating your youngest customers is another way to promote your pizza. Rocky Mountain Flatbread offers a Family Night, during which kids make their own pizzas. During these events, says Fielden, "I find that kids move away from the standard cheese pizza and start to try ingredients that they would never normally try."

"We do an Organic Kids Class every third Saturday of the month," says Haley. "Kids make their own organic pizza while we teach them about organics and sustainable living."

Going green doesn't have to mean making a complete 180 in how you run your pizzeria. Simply taking baby steps can make a huge impact on your customers and your community. ▶

Victoria J. Schoenke is a freelance writer based in Madison, Wisconsin.

Check out these other organic pizzerias for inspiration:

Hot Lips, Portland, OR

www.hotlipspizza.com

With five locations in Portland, Hot Lips uses mostly local organic ingredients in its food. The employees also cure and smoke their own meats at the Hot Lips Commissary.

Pizzaiolo, Oakland, CA

www.pizzaioloakland.com

98% of Pizzaiolo's seasonal meat and produce is locally grown and organic. Its menu changes daily.

Della Zona, Athens, OH

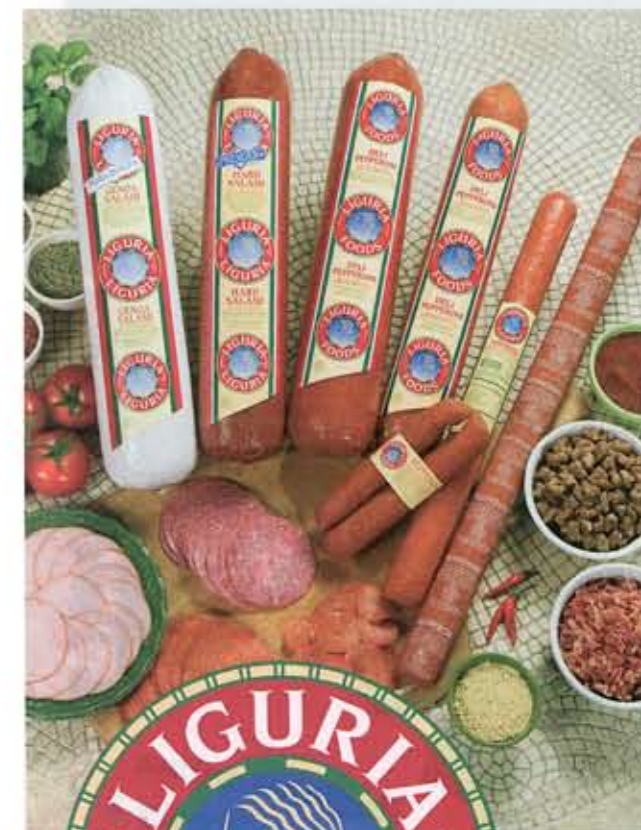
www.dellazona.com

Italian for "from the region," Della Zona works with more than 16 local farmers and food producers to create meals from scratch.

Lilly's Pizza, Raleigh, NC

www.lillyspizza.com

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