



PMQ's Pizza Magazine

SEPTEMBER 2008 • \$8.00

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PIZZA POWER REPORT

PMQ's 2008 INDUSTRY ANALYSIS



The PMQ 200

AMERICA'S TOP PIZZA CHAINS



POSTMASTER:
Change Service
Requested

PMQ, Inc.
PO Box 2019
Langhorne, PA 19047

Throw Out

Tradition

Not-so-traditional menu items drive sales for entrepreneurial operators.

By Betsy Slinkard

In this age of "I want more," it's not always enough to offer just pizza. This could be the reason that many pizzerias are now offering nontraditional menu items alongside their traditional pies. In most cases, operators agree that offering more than pizza helps to drive sales by giving their customers greater variety and an incentive to come back often. Others do it to differentiate themselves or to keep one step ahead of the competition.

"I sell tacos by the ton," says Chris Tierney from Chris' Pizza Americana in Nagasaki, Japan, who added tacos to his menu last year. "The operations are simple and the food cost is low. You can easily upsell tacos; they take less time to prepare than a large pepperoni." Tierney also offers takoyaki (octopus fritters), cooked rice balls, onion rings, shaved ice desserts, calamari and a range of other items he can prepare in the fryer. "Pizza is my main moneymaker, but my side menu items make up more than 35% of sales," Tierney admits.

Tony Grillo of Pizzeria Grillo (www.pizzeriagrillo.com) in Santa Rosa, California, says, "I do a stuffed tomato with risotto, which I stopped serving during the recent tomato scare, but it's now back on the menu with vigor! On Thursday nights, I serve tapas paired with wine, which families share and really enjoy," he says.

Grillo started offering the tapas to stimulate sales; he wants his business to be classified as an Italian pizzeria restaurant. His goal is to differentiate himself and be more creative. "I love to experiment," he enthuses.

"It's been a couple of months since I started the tapas program, and it's starting to catch on. There's currently a separate tapas menu for Thursday nights, but I'm planning to incorporate tapas into my regular menu." Grillo's top sellers are the caprese salad (fresh vegetables, Sonoma basil, in-house balsamic reduction) and the baked olive medley.

"We offer many nontraditional menu items," says Lewis Ulinder from Aubree's Pizza (www.aubreespizza.com) in Ypsilanti, Michigan. "These include hummus; artichoke and spinach dip; chicken tenders; loaded potato skins; soups and chili; burgers; grilled sandwiches, such as chicken and Reuben; pitas and wraps; bistro-style salads; nachos; and quesadillas. Our menu features influences of Asia, the Southwest, and a lot of nontraditional Italian and pizza flavor profiles."

Ulinder says pizza is the "powerhouse," but they also sell a "ton" of burgers, chicken sandwiches and wings. "Pizza is No. 1 in sheer volume, but people order a lot of nontraditional appetizers to go with pizzas," he says.

"We have the only nontraditional pizza topping in the metro Detroit area," boasts Donnie Young, owner of the Amicci's Pizza (www.amiccispizza.com) in Hamtramck, Michigan. "It's a pesto sauce made with basil, pine nuts and olive oil. It replaces the traditional red sauce." Young adds that Amicci's top nontraditional menu item is ribs.

"We have a wide variety of items, and we serve all dayparts, with our nontraditional menu items

providing the opportunity for people to come in more than once a week," says Rob Beall from Ledo Pizza (www.ledopizza.com) in Annapolis, Maryland. "Pizza isn't as strong a day-part as salad and sandwiches.

"Entrée salads are top sellers," Beall continues. "They sell as well in the evening as during the day. Our appetizer category has seen tremendous growth; the chicken and artichoke bruschetta and mini burgers are very popular." Beall also reports that Ledo Pizza has added a sandwich wrap combo to the fall menu. "It's a flatbread sandwich—one is served hot, the other cold. The combo comes with salad, soup or fries." Offering a variety of items helps Ledo Pizza get more customers throughout the day and with more frequency.

At Mr. Pizza in Macon, Georgia, owners Amy and Matthew Howard have taken a family recipe for dumplings and turned it into pizza dough, which makes their pizza very soft. They also make sandwiches out of the dough. "Our dough is made daily, and it's used for everything," says Amy. The Howards' best nontraditional sellers are wings and sandwiches. They also offer chicken BLTs, large calzones (14" pizzas folded in half) and chicken salad, along with ice cream, an apple dessert pizza, and "sweet sticks" coated with cream cheese and cinnamon.

Because her business is located in a rural area 12 miles from the closest fast-food restaurant, Kathy Davis from



Lane 22 Pizza in New Holland, Ohio, carries a full menu of non-traditional items in addition to her pizzas. She decided to offer these items simply because no other place around does. "My customers don't always want just pizza. If you're in a rural location, variety is key," she says.

Davis sells 15 to 20 nontraditional items, including egg rolls, nachos, tacos, salads, bison burgers, wings, French fries, cheese sticks and pizza sticks. She purchased an Autofry to do all of her deep-frying. "All of these items do very well," she states. "My customers like the one-stop shop aspect of it. If they want a pizza and a burger, they only have to come to one place."

Profit Margins

In your eternal quest for heightened profitability, the instant profits gleaned from adding nontraditional menu items to the menu may be difficult to gauge.

"Nontraditional items aren't necessarily more profitable," says Beall. "But offering these items will wake people up to your menu and bring them in for more traditional items. Even if they aren't great sellers, they help bring customers in during the day and in the evening."

Young agrees that his nontraditional items aren't always more profitable. "The Detroit market is very difficult. The competition

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is very demanding. We have to carry a lot of specialty items in order to offer our customers a range of choices. Ribs are not the most profitable items, but you have to carry them in this area, and you have to do them right."

Grillo and Davis report "neck and neck" profitability when comparing nontraditional menu items to traditional items. Grillo's nontraditional menu items hover around the same profit margins as his regular appetizers because they're more labor-intensive. "But the cooks love the creativity," says Grillo. "They become enthusiastic when they work with the tapas."

"Some of our nontraditional items can actually be more profitable, especially because of the soaring cost of cheese that's hurt us," says Ulinder. "But pizza still drives the menu and puts money in the bank."

Marketing the Nontraditional

Once committed to menuing nontraditional items, you need to decide how best to market them. Direct mail, door-to-door posting of flyers and e-mail seem to be the most common methods. "We do mailings and partner with the Grande cheese company from Wisconsin," says Howard. "They help us with our marketing; we don't do door hangers. Occasionally, we may send drivers to put flyers in grocery store windows."

"I market my tapas through local flyers I create in-house," Grillo says. "It's not an extensive campaign right now. I'm re-evaluating my local marketing and advertising budget. I'm going to start working with the *Bohemian*, a local newspaper that puts heavy emphasis on local dining."

"We have a limited-time offer on new items, posters and box toppers," says Beall. "Our items are posted on our website, and



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we have a radio campaign. We also have table talkers, and people see our ads on the takeout pizza boxes."

Aubree's marketing is "stripped down," according to Ulinder. "We have a loyalty program through e-mail, but not much print. We market our pizza more than our nontraditional items."

Friendly Advice

One of the most beneficial things to do before trying any new menu items is to get your customers' input about what you should carry. Have a general angle in mind and always stress quality.

Grillo mentions the importance of presentation. He bought some attractive, flat plates that accentuate the way his tapas are presented. He recommends trying out different items and working on pairing them with a nice wine. "Wine gives the tapas a reason for being; it puts you in a European setting." Grillo also works with a winery in Cloverdale, California, Más Vino. "They have an innovative presentation," Grillo says. "The wine is in a mini keg; you tap it out rather than opening bottles."

Beall agrees that innovation is important. "Search out and try something different; keep it moving and keep it fresh. New items can revive interest from your loyal customers as well."

Ulinder says that many operators make the mistake of trying to add items through their pizza ovens: "We have salamanders (broilers) that we use for a lot of things. Having the right equipment is key; don't 'wing it' through the pizza oven."

"It's never a bad thing to add nontraditional items," Howard concludes. "We do a regular focus on football—wings and pizza—and kill two birds with one stone. Kids like it here because of the ice cream. One kid said to his granddad, 'We're not going there if there's no ice cream.'"

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Looking for some nontraditional menu ideas? Start here.

Antipasto	Frittatas
Artichoke dip	Gyros
Baklava	Hummus
Burgers (regular and mini)	Nachos
Breaded hot peppers	Onion rings
Breaded mushrooms	Parmesan wafer crisps
Breaded stuffed jalapeños	Pitas
Bruschetta	Pizza sticks
Burritos	Potato skins
Calamari	Quesadillas
Galzones	Quiche
Cheese cubes	Ribs
Cheese sticks	Sandwiches
Chicken tenders	Soups
Chili	Stromboli
Desserts	Tacos
Egg rolls	Tamales
Empanadas	Tapas
Enchiladas	Tostadas



When you're ready to add some nontraditional items to the menu, the following suppliers have you covered:

- Burke Corporation**, 800-654-1152, www.burkecorp.com
- ConAgra Foods (Lamb Weston)**, 800-766-7783, www.tantalizers.com
- Deli Brands of America**, 866-276-DELI, www.delibrandsamerica.com
- Dole Fresh Vegetables**, 800-333-5454, www.dole.com
- Double B Foods**, 800-679-0349, www.doubleb.com
- Kitchen Table Bakers**, 800-486-4582, www.kitchentablebakers.com
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- Mission Foodservice**, 800-443-7994, www.missionfoodservice.com
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