

pizza passion

Sherleen Mahoney

Americans are passionate about pizza. There are contentious debates over which style and city's pizza is the best. But regardless of whether we're talking about New York style, California style or Chicago's deep dish, these pizzas all have one thing in common: They take about 10 minutes to bake.

With the emergence of fast-casual pizza, people can enjoy pizza in a whole new way.

"If you're eating by yourself or if you're in a hurry, pizza isn't an option, but fast-casual pizza solves those barriers to consumption," said Randy Gier, CEO of Pie Five. "Pizza by the slice only works in a few highly dense and populated urban markets like New York City, and while it meets the same need, who wants to see a slice of pizza with some topping thrown on it and reheated in an oven? Fast-casual is doing it better because the pizza is hot, fresh, customized and fast."

At Pie Five, the leader of the fast-casual pizza market, the service style involves a "make line," where customers choose a style of crust, the sauce, the cheese and the toppings. The personal-sized, 10-inch pizzas are assembled in front of them and then placed on a conveyor oven. Each one takes about two minutes to bake, and by the time the customers reach the cashier to pay, their pie is ready—all in the span of five minutes.

Americans now have another type of pizza to be passionate about.

A Different Spin on Pizza

Pie Five is a sister brand of Pizza Inn, a pizza buffet restaurant that has been around since 1958. Pizza Inn executives were looking at market and customer trends and saw that fast-casual pizza was a niche that was not yet tapped.

Around the same time, TurboChef, a manufacturer of rapid-cook ovens, approached Pizza Inn with a revolutionary conveyor oven that fully cooks a pizza in two minutes and delivers remarkably consistent results. Prior, the average conveyor cook time was between five and seven minutes.

The magic behind the TurboChef HhC 2620 oven, which is the model Pie Five uses in all its restaurants, is the unprecedented high rate of heat transfer that heats food faster and provides a better depth of bake.

Most conveyor ovens have a single blower that pushes air forward at approximately 24 mph. The air is mechanically divided: 40 percent of the volume is directed to the top of the oven and 60 percent is directed to the bottom. Channels direct the hot air flow toward a cover plate with holes, and the air flows out in jets, which is then balanced for even baking, browning and crisping.

"You're only cooking where the finger cover plates allow air to pass," explained Al Harvey, National Sales Director of TurboChef Technologies Inc. "The variable-speed motor controllers allow the TurboChef conveyor ovens to put a much higher volume of hot air against the product, accelerating the rate of heat transfer. This results in baking in about one half the time of a standard conveyor."

The new ovens have two blowers, each with variable-speed motor controllers that can move air from 6 to 60 mph and independently from top and bottom. The perfect rate of bake can be achieved by adjusting the air velocity. The top and bottom jet plates are identical and continuous.

"You're cooking in the entire cavity and not just where the jet plates allow air to come through," Harvey said.

With the TurboChef oven's optional catalytic converter, which converts grease and smoke into water, carbon dioxide, and trace amounts of nitrogen and oxygen, UL has certified these ovens for ventless installation.

"By removing a 6-foot hood, a small restaurant can put nearly \$50,000 back on the bottom line over five years," Harvey said.

After several successful trials with the oven in a test kitchen, Pizza Inn was convinced it was ready to enter the fast-casual pizza market and opened the first Pie Five in Fort Worth, Texas, in 2011.

While there are dozens of fast-casual pizza brands out there, Pie Five remains the market leader for many important reasons. For one, it is the only brand that delivers pizza in five minutes.

"At other places, customers will go sit down after they've order and the staff brings the food to them, or they'll call your name to come retrieve your food, but at Pie Five, by the time you get to the cashier, you get your pie," said Chris Smith, Senior Vice President of Operations. "The whole process takes five minutes—hence, our name."

Secondly, the company offers four different types of crusts: thin, whole grain, pan and gluten-free. Lastly, the consistency of the quality is unparalleled.

Most of Pie Five's competitors use deck ovens, which do not offer consistent results and can only bake one type of crust. And unlike its competitors, Pie Five shreds its mozzarella and provolone cheese fresh every day, and the dough is made fresh, never frozen. Not many of its competitors can claim that.

"The dough mixers and rollers are on the front line because we want every guest to know we're making fresh dough," Smith said.

Pie Five also offers fresh, made-to-order salads and brownie and cookie pies that are made from scratch and baked every morning.

Circle of Trust

With 21 restaurants open—13 corporate and eight franchises— and performing successfully in seven states, Pie Five is poised for rapid growth and expansion. The company currently has four new restaurants under construction and plans to double in size by the end of the year.

They're also choosy about who they do business with. Every franchisee must fit in with the company's positive, fun and supportive culture. Around the office, it's been unofficially and lovingly dubbed as the No Jerks Rule.

"We want to work with and be partnered with people we like working with," Smith said. "So, we take a lot of time with these folks. We have multiple meetings, site visits and dinners with them to make sure they're the right people for us. It's not just whether they have a lot of money or they are operating a lot of restaurants and concepts; they have to fit within the culture of Pie Five."

"We're picky about who we partner with because we plan on doing this for a long time," Gier added.

So far, 15 franchise groups have signed commitments to open more than 200 restaurants over the next five years.

The company would like to keep a relatively even balance between corporate and franchise restaurants.

"We're not like those concepts that have one corporate restaurant and the rest are franchise; we like running restaurants," Smith said.

The "no jerks" culture extends to the corporate restaurants and headquarters as well.

"Pie Five fosters a family-friendly environment," said Christina Coy, Director of Marketing for Pie Five.

She says the small corporate team functions more like a family.

"We give each other high fives, a lot of positivity, and we support each other," Coy said. "And in the restaurants, our staff is so friendly and so positive. They'll ask our customers about their families, their lives and really get involved with them. Our mission is to bring smiles to people's faces, one slice at a time."

As a burgeoning brand, Pie Five's marketing strategy includes word of mouth and grassroots efforts.

"Word of mouth is five to 10 times more effective than traditional marketing," Coy said.

During grand openings, the company will buy radio ads, send direct mailers that offer free pizzas and have a street team hand out pizza cards.

"The idea is to get people in to try us," Coy said. "Once we get them in the door, they'll return."

Spreading the Love

Since it costs the same to build a good restaurant as it does a bad one, Pie Five has strict requirements for the site of each restaurant.

The perfect locations for Pie Five restaurants have a minimum of 50,000 people within a 3-mile radius, which means it's mostly a residential population; a 30,000 daytime population, which guarantees a busy lunch crowd; a median household income of \$60,000 and higher, which allows for some disposable income to be spent on lunch; and a minimum of 35,000 cars per day on the primary road.

Each restaurant measures an average of 2,200 square feet, with at least a width of 32 feet in the front of the house to fit a horizontal kitchen layout to match the service line.

"A horizontal kitchen allows guests to see the entire length of the service line," said Bob Witken, Director, Construction and Development. "It's about show and the unique guest experience. The service line is a stage."

Pie Five has real estate brokers who live in each market, and they are tasked with finding locations that meet these requirements. When a few sites have been identified, Perry Jones, Vice President of Real Estate, spends a few days in the market. If he approves the sites, negotiations begin with the landlords, and he takes the proposals to the real estate committee, which consists of himself, Gier, Smith and Tim Mullany, the Chief Financial Officer, for final approval. Sites that are approved go on to leases.

Franchisees hire their own brokers, who are guided by Jones. After a few sites have been selected, Jones will also visit the market with the franchisee and broker, and the committee will make the final determination.

Jones, who says he truly enjoys what he does, is particularly excited about Pie Five's potential in Dallas.

"Dallas is very accepting of new food trends, and the quality of the food is outstanding," he said. "It's great to be involved with a brand that is young and aggressive. Everybody is happy to come to work and is excited about what we're trying to do. It's great to be around a group of people who are all pulling for a common goal."

After a site is approved, the restaurant's layout must then be approved to ensure a consistent look across the brand.

For the back of the house, Pie Five has worked with the kitchen equipment supplier to design the floor plan. It's important to have set standards and a highly detailed layout of the space.

"Every rack and every station have drawings with specific shelf heights and configurations," Smith said. "That way, our restaurants are very consistent and the franchisees don't have to figure out what goes where. We want them focused on making great pizza and serving customers."

When the site goes into the permit phase, the Pie Five team conducts weekly new store orientation phone calls with the franchise team to discuss the necessary items and tasks that need to be completed before the restaurant opens.

The company has spent the last year establishing these processes and procedures to prepare the brand for growth across the country.

Easy as Pie

Pie Five is very open-minded when it comes to leveraging new products and solutions to make facility management easier.

"We always look for ways to make items install faster, save cost and give our guests a better environment," Witken said.

For example, the company uses DuctSox, a fabric ductwork, in the dining rooms. Perforated holes along the entire length of the polyester DuctSox deliver uniform dispersion of HVAC. This eliminates hot and cold spots and creates a more comfortable guest environment.

The product also saves Pie Five \$7,500 per store because it is so easy to install. Traditional metal ductwork takes about four to five days to install, while DuctSox, which is hung on a supporting wire, can be installed in Pie Five restaurants in about five hours.

Other advantages to fabric include easy cleaning and repairs. To clean DuctSox, employees simply take it down, turn it inside out, throw it in a commercial washer and dryer, and hang it back up. For repairs, Witken can send the DuctSox back to the company or take it to a local seamstress who handles upholstery.

"In open-ceiling environments, metal ductwork requires extra maintenance because of the constant dust that builds up on the top," Witken said. "It needs to be cleaned two or three times a year. When the HVAC is turned off, the shape of the DuctSox collapses, which minimizes dust build up. By using DuctSox, we reduced the install time by a quarter, the material cost to an eighth and the ongoing maintenance cost to clean the ductwork. After we installed our first DuctSox, we noticed how evenly balanced the temperature was in the dining room. This was a big plus for the customers."

Currently, 15 Pie Five restaurants are using DuctSox, and Witken is so pleased with the product that he intends to continue using it in all future restaurants.

"We are happy to see that Pie Five is open to innovation, not only in their product, but in their facilities, providing a better customer and employee experience," said Philip Sloan, Inside Sales Manager and Sales Engineer for DuctSox. "We look forward to a long-term relationship with them."

Pie Five also uses LED lighting to save the time and labor on constantly changing incandescent light bulbs.

"One of my pet peeves was walking into a restaurant and counting how many lights bulbs need to be changed," Witken said. "Managers and the crew have better things to do—like serving guests. Removing the constant need for light bulb replacements—LEDs are warranted to last more than 50,000 hours—saves the maintenance cost to replace them."

In addition, where municipalities allow, Pie Five uses the Goslyn Grease Recovery Device. Since all the pizza meat toppings (pepperoni, grilled chicken, ham, beef, sausage and bacon) are delivered to each restaurant fully cooked, there are no cross-contamination issues to worry about, and the restaurants don't produce a lot of grease. Therefore, the restaurants do not need sophisticated grease traps.

The Goslyn Grease Recovery Device is an immiscible liquid separator that eliminates fats, oil and grease (FOG) in wastewater. There are no moving parts to break and no grease traps to clean.

"You don't clean it; you maintain it," said Jack Landers, Owner and Managing Partner of Green Kitchen Solutions, a distributor of Goslyn Environmental Systems. "You do four things every day: empty the solids basket, empty the oil captured in the container, rinse out the container and put it back into the unit."

Pie Five restaurants accumulate less than ¼ cup of grease a day, which is discarded into the trash each night.

"After a month of using the Goslyn, our water samples exceed EPA requirements by 20 fold," Witken said. "We don't have a lot of grease, so it doesn't make sense to put in a 1,000-gallon grease trap."

Witken even uses smart solutions in the bathrooms. The bathroom sink simplifies maintenance because the bowl contains the soap dispenser, the faucet and the hand dryer. This eliminates soap dripping on the floor and wet walls. Any water that is blown off of hands stays in the sink.

"Cleaning the sink bowl is much easier than cleaning the walls and the floor," Witken said. "It just requires a simple wipe down."

Each Pie Five uses two ovens that are stacked on top of each other. One oven is typically enough for an average day, but having a redundant oven is beneficial for extremely busy hours and in case one of the ovens fails. TurboChef also offers a program that remanufactures its ovens every five years. The company will ship new ovens to the Pie Five restaurants, and the old ovens are placed in the shipping box and sent back to TurboChef to be refurbished.

With these products and services in place, facilities maintenance has yet to be problematic for Witken.

Leading the Market Forward

The fast-casual pizza market is an imitative industry because the barriers to entry are low.

"When people see a good idea, they try to copy it quickly," Gier said. But he is confident that Pie Five has the recipe for long-term success.

"Our product is a lot more consistent because of our cooking system, and consistency and quality are the key success factors in our industry," he said. "Great service is important to elevate the experience and atmosphere makes a place inviting, but if the food isn't great and it isn't consistently great, nothing else matters. Our cook and service platforms allow us to consistently put out hot, fresh and tasty pizza in a variety that customers want."

He plans on maintaining the company's position as the market leader by staying true to the company's strong infrastructure and never losing sight of the customers.

"We're extraordinarily fortunate to be in the business we're in," he said. "We have the privilege of putting a smile on people's faces every day because we sell pizza. What a great opportunity we have to make people's bad days better and make their good days great. To do that requires serving craveable, craveable, come-back-quality pizza. We can't ever lose sight of that. We've got to have the operating processes and systems in place to deliver smiles and smiles after smiles. And we back it up with great service and clean restaurants."

Gier believes in five years, there will be a shift in the fast-casual pizza landscape.

"Most are just jumping on the hot trend," he said. "But we're not. We're trying to serve our customers and meet a need in the marketplace and do it with excellence."

He believes doing it fast is important, but not more important than doing it right. And he doesn't forget about the fun, which is probably what he loves most about being in the pizza business.

"That's why we'll be the ones standing in 10 years and beyond," he said. "If you can't have fun selling pizza—God help you."

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator.