PITFIRE
ARTISAN
PIZZA

2013 INDEPENDENT PIZZERIA OF THE YEAR

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California Dreamin’

California-based Pitfire Artisan Pizza named 2013 Independent Pizzeria of the Year
It's 10:30 a.m. on a bright summer day — not unusual for the California coastline — and the folks at Pitfire Artisan Pizza in Costa Mesa are already hard at work. The front door is open to let in the breeze, and an employee stands on a ladder washing windows while another mans the wood-fired oven. Owner Paul Hibler and a few members of his management team — dubbed “tribal elders” — meet us bearing hot doughnuts from a new concept across the street. “We like to support local businesses. This concept, it's like ours, only with doughnuts,” Hibler says as he flips open the lid and invites us to dive in. “Our restaurants, they're neighborhood centric. It's who we are.” We would soon understand.

By 11 a.m., customers have started filling the booths, but few probably realize the magnitude of the company they’re patronizing. With seven stores and sales of just under $25 million, Pitfire Artisan Pizza has rapidly made a name for itself.
not only in the L.A. market but also in the pizza industry — and earned the designation of Pizza Today’s 2013 Independent Pizzeria of the Year.

Hibler and his business partner, David Sanfield, got their start in the industry in a roundabout way. For years, they owned one of the top movie catering companies and toured the world working on high-budget films. Two basic ideas fueled Pitfire’s development in 1998. In the mid-1990s, Hibler and Sanfield watched the explosion of concepts that combined high-quality food in a fast-casual setting, and they had been grilling and baking pizzas on-set for years.

“We wanted to build a company with equity,” Hibler says. “We wanted some equity in a brand, and we thought ‘Let’s do a pizza version of a Baja Fresh,’ which is incredibly ironic today. There are a lot of people trying to rush into the pizza market who are trying to do a Chipotle version of pizza. Unfortunately — and this is one of our market advantages — we found out really quick that it just doesn’t correlate. We had a really fast-pizza product. We were turning it around quick and we were serving it more like a fast-food restaurant than a quality restaurant. We learned early on that pizza is not
fast food. ... Pizza is a very communal, personal experience."

Just a few years after launching their brand, Hibler and Sanfield abandoned their initial concept and by 2003 moved toward a more artisan pizza focus. "We are first and foremost culinarily driven," Hibler says, "and we aspire to bigger and better things. ... We looked at this counter service market and just went all the way to the end of it. We focused on the experience and the design and the whole package: ... We started pushing the quality of our food higher.

"We really started to learn our craft. We simplified our menu, we put in china and real glasses and silverware and we got rid of all fast-food references."

Chief in importance is the quality of the food. Pizza accounts for 60 percent of sales, and Pitfire's management doesn't take that lightly. The dough has a two-day ferment and is made by just two people at a commissary. The Costa Mesa store is too far, however, so they've added a dough room with windows into the restaurant and make it on-site there.

They source many of their ingredients from local farmer's markets and create five to six daily specials depending on what's available. Using local ingredients is good social responsibility "and there's no excuse, really, for people not to be doing it that way," Hibler says.

Pizzas bake in a 625°F wood-fired oven, with the domes reaching upwards of 1,000°F. It takes just two to three minutes to bake to perfection. The company's record for pizzas sold in one day sits at 1,027, and the wood-fired ovens have a hard time maintaining a solid temperature at that pace. With the newest store in Costa Mesa, they're trying a gas/wood-fire combination to test capacity without sacrificing quality. Training is crucial, "and in order for you to be able to cook in the oven, it takes a year at Pitfire," Hibler says. "I don't have any turnover. I pay really good money, and it's a badge of honor.

"Because I cook and I come from the kitchen, I have a lot of respect and empathy for what that (means)."

Three or four people work the pizza station during peak times, with one person opening dough, two topping the skins and a fourth who never takes his or her eyes off the oven.

A small menu ensures Pitfire is putting out the freshest food possible, and Hibler says he doesn't want to overextend their offerings. "When you see an over-designed building with too many elements on it or you go to a restaurant and the menu is too big, that comes from fear and lack of confidence," Hibler adds. "The best thing to do when you own a pizza restaurant is to sell pizza. When you have your pizza ratio up over 50 percent in a restaurant, it's the greatest thing in the world."

Nine pizzas make up the core menu
and 70 percent of pizza sales. Favorites include The Burrata ($10.75), which includes burrata cheese, tomato sauce, wild arugula, caramelized onion, hazelnut and a pesto drizzle, and a classic Margherita ($9.75).

While customers can make up their own pizzas, there’s also a “little bit of urban legend ordering,” Hibler says, adding that customers can order pizzas that pre-date Pitfire’s shift toward artisan pizza, but “I don’t have any cheeseburger pizzas or any weird, goofy ideas.”

The temptation is always there to add their most popular specials to their permanent menu, “but we don’t, because our customers remember that in the spring, we do the artichoke pizza, and in the fall we have the pumpkin pizza,” he says. “Heirloom tomato season is just starting, and everyone is waiting for our tomato pizza.”

They’ve also found a company that offers a whole-milled flour, which they plan to add to their menu to appeal to people who may have sensitivities to traditional flour. “They’re taking the whole berry, the whole grain, and never separating it,” Hibler says. “They’re milling it all together, and we’re learning how to make pizza dough with this. It’s a little bit different, and we’re developing our own wild yeast. I’m really committed to figuring out a way to get this into people’s lives.”

The Costa Mesa store was the first to have a full liquor license, but beer and wine have been the greater focus of the company. When they redesigned the concept, the proprietors took a harder look at the relationship between beer and pizza. When they designed the Culver City, California, store, they added an open-glass beer fridge and a keg system to the front-of-the-house to increase eye appeal. “You have to show people what’s important to them,” Hibler says. “You go to some of these other places … and you see a couple of bottles stacked by the register. That doesn’t make your mouth water.”

Alcohol now accounts for roughly 15 to 19 percent of sales across the brand.

Delivery makes up about 12 percent of food sales, with carryout another 20 percent. Dine-in comprises the majority of sales, with dinner a larger day part than lunch.

Attention to detail doesn’t stop at just the food, however. Part of Pitfire’s passion lay in individualizing the restaurants and tailoring them to the areas. In fitting with the company’s focus on social responsibility, they prefer to take over existing spaces rather than develop new properties. The Costa Mesa location, once home to a Marie Callender’s Restaurant & Bakery, was retrofitted with Volkswagen-inspired booths, wood paneling reminiscent of surf vans and VW headlights that spell out the company’s name in Braille across a wall. (There’s even a speakeasy
bar tucked away behind a wall that functions separately from the restaurant — and yes, you need a password to get in.) Such local design integration won the company an architectural design award for its store in Culver City.

"Pitfire is a hybrid counter service," Hibler says. "You order at the counter, but when you sit, you're taken care of by staff as if you had a server."

Why not full-service dining? "To save people time," Hibler says. "To put a high-quality product out. If you have a family, you've got two kids and you come in, we all know you've got about 30 or 40 minutes with kids before they blow up. ... The counters save families a lot of time. The counters, once you get people used to it, really (are) much more efficient."

The company isn't shy about attracting children and families, and while it initially took a hit on sites like Yelp for the number of kids in their stores, they wouldn't have it any other way. A local NPR affiliate once tagged Pitfire as the place "where foodies bring their kids," Hibler says, and that only builds the company's brand.

After 8 p.m. though, a DJ spins vinyl and the restaurants take on a more "date
night” feel. The ability to attract multiple audiences has made it attractive not only to diners but also to investors (read on for more on Pitfire’s planned growth).

Aesthetics and product quality aside, Pitfire’s management also focuses on creating a culture not only in their communities but also for the 400 people—called “tribe members”—employed by the company. Hibler says managers earn “the upper end of the pay scale” and he dislikes the term “team.”

“We call (managers) tribal elders,” he says. “Everybody’s out in the field all the time to help do this.”

The Pitfire Web site is peppered with staff photos and videos. Tribe members are encouraged to customize their uniform shirts to the point of participating in company contests for creativity. “We value the individual,” Hibler says, “and compared to other restaurants in this genre, our people make a lot of money. ... I have people who are supporting themselves working at Pitfire, and that really means a lot to us.

“Obamacare? Bring it on. Right now, I’m figuring out how to do it, not how I’m going to get around it. I’m completely committed to it because when you have something like this that you don’t dumb down to the lowest denominator, you have to have great people.”

Despite Pitfire’s success, Hibler is candid about the company’s growing pains. Within two years of opening, the brand had already expanded to include a location in a hot shopping mall and one built in a licensing deal with Universal Studios. Essentially, they fell into “the seduction of kind of believing (our) own BS at the time,” Hibler admits. “We thought (Pitfire) was for every man and everywhere, and it didn’t matter where we were going with it, so we took the mall deal. We didn’t really look at the demographics and think about who our customers were. ... We knew before we finished
They rode it out for a year before closing that store, and found that Universal Studios didn’t have the same interests. “They wanted to sell bottled water and lemonade, and we were interested in creating,” Hibler says. After seven years, Pifire opted not to renew their contract because they felt the location at Universal’s entertainment district was hurting their brand. “Pizza looks really simple on the outside, and it’s not,” he says. “We had to go through all these things to get us where we are today. And we’re still making little mistakes here and there. It’s when you’re not willing to acknowledge your mistakes that you get into trouble.”

Plenty of development companies have shown interest in helping Pifire expand, but “we have a model in mind,” Hibler says. “We don’t think there should be a thousand Pifires in the world, like Chipotle. We’ve turned down being in airports and places (developers) would be happy to find a spot for us. But we’re more focused on enriching the lives of the people who work for Pifire and come to Pifire. That’s a neighborhood idea. That’s a cultural idea.”

The eighth store is currently under construction in Pasadena, California, “but I call myself an anti-chain,” Hibler says. “I’m a bit of a free-spirited person ... I really don’t want to put the chain label on us. If you were to tour all seven of our stores right now, you’d see that they’re all different. That’s a lot of work. It’s painful.”

He’s only slightly kidding. Focus has turned to building an infrastructure that is solid enough to allow Pifire to grow without losing its edgy identity, but Hibler isn’t afraid to tie on an apron and cook in the kitchen when he visits stores. “I want to make sure all these people know I still know how to bring it,” he adds with a grin.

They opened three locations last year (plus a separate concept, Supurba Snack Bar) and essentially doubled the size of the company. Four more units are in the works. “I say no a lot,” Hibler says. “There’s real estate flying at us constantly. We’re focused on finding places where we can have a long relationship with a community (and) with people.”

A cultural battle plan is in place when entering a new community that includes finding and supporting the top fundraising events and schools and holding parties for what Hibler calls “mommy bloggers” — all of whom generate powerful word of mouth.

You won’t find ads for the company splashed on billboards or atop taxicab signs, and they don’t coupon. “We put all the value that we can onto the plate,” Hibler says. “We don’t discount. ... Our behavior is our marketing.”

The Costa Mesa store is functioning as a sort of prototype to test for self-efficiency as a regional commissary able to support several stores, and they plan to use that model in the future. They found a pair of investors and plan to first grow in California, and “I finally had to hire a grownup to run the company,” Hibler says, speaking of company CEO Carlos Bernal, but Hibler realizes that he doesn’t make any money by sitting at a desk.

“If anything, my role now is to protect the integrity of the brand of our company, and teach,” he says.

And if Hibler could give one piece of advice after 15 years in the industry?

“If you want to get in the pizza business, make the pizza the most important thing that you do,” he says. “You should want to sell pizza. It’s the most profitable food that you can make and sell in this country.”

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