

Chipotle's stealth move into pizza

Written by Peter Romeo, Restaurant Business newsletter Vice President & Editorial Director
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It could be the biggest Duh! in restaurant history. Entrepreneurs of all stripes and levels of capitalization are jockeying to become the Chipotle of the pizza market. Why wouldn't Chipotle make a run at becoming the Chipotle of pies and sauce? Turns out it's doing exactly that.

The burrito chain issued a statement Wednesday that confirmed reports of a quiet entry into the so-called better pizza market. Since May, it's been running a pizzeria in Denver in collaboration with local restaurateurs Bobby Stuckey and Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson. Chipotle said a search is already underway elsewhere in the city for second and third units of Pizza Locale.

The fast-casual concept could be a Chipotle without the rice and beans. Customers move along a prep line, specifying what toppings they want on their pie to a pizza maker on the other side of the glass.

True to the set-up of virtually all better-pizza start-ups, Pizza Locale features a high-temp oven that bakes the pies in a flash. Chipotle said the cook time is less than two minutes.

The concept also hews to the emerging segment's model for serving wine. Red and white selections will be sold from a tap, eliminating the need for servers to uncork a bottle.

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The press release notes that Stuckey is a master sommelier. Business partner Mackinnon-Patterson is a chef. The two collaborated on Fesca Food and Wine.

They make no mystery as to where they drew inspiration for Pizza Locale. The press release specified that the concept is a fast-casual reduction of a full-service restaurant in Boulder, Colo., that also operates under the name Pizza Locale.

Confirmation of Chipotle's venture, apparently triggered by a Denver-area blog post and a story in The Wall Street Journal, is the second announcement this week of an entry into the pizza market by a dominant player in another quick-service segment. A Subway franchisee has disclosed plans to open a pizza version of the sandwich concept on the campus of the University of Nebraska.