

Pizza Fusion puts the planet on a healthy diet

By Rodger Brown

PIZZA FUSION SAYS IT WANTS A healthy menu for its customers and the world. So the Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based chain is serving organic pizza in ecologi-

cally friendly restaurants. "Our goal is to have zero footprint on the environment — and great pizza," said Michael Gordon, the chain's COO and co-founder.

The chain's pizzas are cooked in ovens that also heat the water. They are served to customers who sit on seat cushions made from soy instead of Styrofoam, packed into

cardboard boxes that can be returned for a quarter, and delivered in gas-saving hybrid cars. The restaurants themselves are built to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards and use natural light to save electricity. The sinks are made of bamboo, and the toilets are flushed with old dishwater.

Gordon and his partner, Vaughan Lazar, who is CEO, opened their first Pizza Fusion unit in February 2006, in Deerfield Beach, Fla. They followed that up with a franchise unit in Fort Lauderdale this past March. These are the only units currently in operation, but the company has sold 20 franchises throughout Colorado, Florida, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. It anticipates having 20 more by year-end, and a total of 300 franchises by 2010.

Gordon says he and Lazar had always intended to offer organic pizza, but they did not initially plan to embrace environmental sustainability to the degree they have. "At first we said, 'Let's do something different with pizza,'" Gordon said.

To be sure, their environmental consciousness may be a great way to stand out in the crowded, \$31 billion U.S. pizza business. Pizza Fusion's recipe for store build-out is about as important as its recipe for pizza. More and more businesses are tweaking their operations to present themselves as responsible stewards of the earth. But Pizza Fusion has even embraced LEED certification — the U.S. Green Building Council's requirements for "green" construction — as the standard for all its franchise units.

"People come into Pizza Fusion and they feel like they're doing something good for the environment," Gordon said.

As part of the Pizza Fusion franchise package, Image 4, a Manchester, N.H.-based visual merchandising company, designed the physical environments that project that brand message. Image 4 CEO Jeff Baker says he was impressed with Lazar and Gordon for the depth of their commitment to environmental issues. "It's a very rich area, but it's also an area where there's a lot of disagreement over what's truly green," Baker said. The term is bandied about a lot, he says. He prefers to use "limited load" or "reduced load."

"I have yet to find anything that's zero load," he said. "Somewhere, something is going to cost the environment." Clearly, though, these guys wanted to take conser-

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vation as far as they could, he says. "They were very aggressive about pushing our ability," he said. "Have you done this? 'Have you heard about this?' It really became incredibly exciting."

It was important also to get the customers excited. After all, unless the customer knows he is sitting on biodegradable

soy cushions instead of petroleum-based polymers that will never decay, a marketing opportunity is lost. So Image 4's design includes a display containing information about such details.

The customers do seem impressed — that first franchise turned a profit after the first two months of operation. Likewise

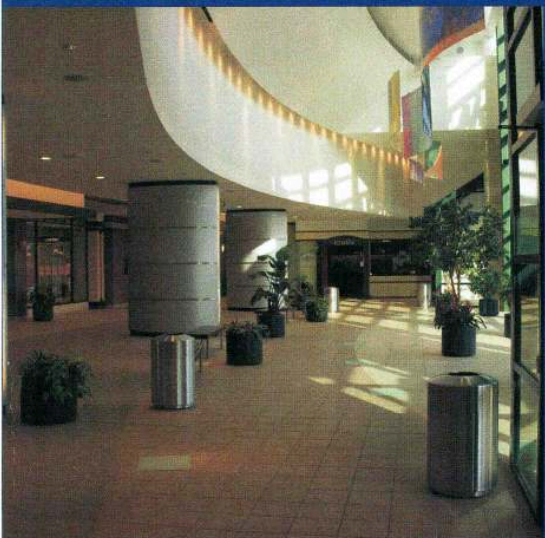
business people are enthusiastic about the company's environment-friendly model. In south Florida Pizza Fusion made a deal with franchisees who had worked for Quantum Foods, one of the world's largest food packagers, and for Pottery Barn. In Fort Lauderdale, one franchisee also has a KFC-Taco Bell restaurant, and another was an execu-

tive of toy company Hasbro. Obviously, saving the earth is no longer a mission for anti-establishment hippie types exclusively.

In July the company teamed up with commercial real estate services firm CB Richard Ellis to expand the business. CBRE itself had announced in May that it would become the first major commercial real estate firm to be carbon-neutral by 2010.

Russell Barnett, executive director of CBRE's restaurant specialty group, says he will work with Pizza Fusion to find locations in markets that have a Trader Joe's, a Whole Foods or a Wild Oats. "We're looking for blended density," Barnett said. "In the daytime, we would want a heavy office

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At a glance...

PIZZA FUSION

Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

No. of stores:

Two

Preferred locations:

Lifestyle centers

Leasing contact:

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component to support the lunch trade. The other segment is dense residential. We'd like to be able to locate so deliveries can be made within 20 to 30 minutes."

Barnett says he anticipates locating a significant number of stores in California and southwest Florida. "We're also already under very significant discussions concerning expansion and representation in Europe and the Far East," he said.

Pizza Fusion, it turns out, is not the only chain trying to make its pizza green. Domino's, the world's largest pizza company, has tested an all-electric vehicle for commercial deliveries, mobile advertising and event marketing.

Nor are these environmental impulses confined to fast-food concepts. The National Restaurant Association launched a task force last summer to get its nearly 1 million restaurant members to adopt environmentally sensitive business practices.

But matching Pizza Fusion's level of commitment to environmental sustainability will be no easy thing, says Gordon. "We wanted something to make sure that there was no way anybody could top us," he said. "And I think we've done it."

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