





Pizza Pizzazz

Gold Coast restaurateurs top pies with treats like truffles and lobster

BY ELIZABETH CLARKE PHOTOS BY DANA HOFF

Here in the glitzy Gold Coast, the all-American staple of pizza night takes on a whole new twist. A new breed of pizzerias make their pies only with the finest and freshest ingredients. They're restaurants with coal- or wood-fired ovens or hybrid delivery cars or truffle pizzas that could set you back \$250 or more.

Coal Mine Pizza in Boca Raton specializes in those pricey pies. It special-orders white truffles from Italy at market price during their two-month growing season. But it's far from the only pizza joint giving everyman's food a classy makeover.

Take a look at these options:

- Pizza Fusion, a rapidly expanding chain based in Fort Lauderdale, will bring an organic pie to your house in a hybrid vehicle with biodegradable silverware—and could add in a gluten-free and vegan brownie or organic beer on the side. Its pizzas start at \$14 and range up to \$48 for a surf-and-turf pie. Pizza Fusion has restaurants in Deerfield Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach Gardens, Wellington and Weston.
- Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza, a small chain with five restaurants throughout the area, features "pizza well done," as they say, plus fresh ingredients and personal service all designed to create pizza reminiscent of what the owner remembers eating in Brooklyn. Pizzas, most of which cost under \$20, sizzle for just four minutes in a 800-degree coal-burning oven that creates a crispy crust.



Coal Mine Pizza in Boca's Royal Palm Place creates a crispier and tastier pizza, the founder says, with fresh, homemade mozzarella and sauces made daily in the restaurant along with a secret dough recipe and a coal oven that cooks pizza in three minutes at 800 to 850 degrees. Prices start at \$16 for a personal pie and run up to \$200 or more for the white truffle pie. Black truffle pizzas, which are available year-round and don't require a special order, start at about \$40.

Fire Rock Restaurant Bar and Grill in West Palm Beach features coal-fired pizza, Italian-style, overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway.

Even traditional pizza places like Big Louie's, with restaurants in Broward County and Boca Raton, offer an unusual variety of toppings, including Misto de Pesce—featuring calamari, shrimp and baby clams—and Philly Cheesesteak Pizza.

Steve's Wood Fired Pizza in Boca Raton is "serious about well-done pizza," its motto declares, and it means that in two ways: cooked thoroughly in a wood-burning oven and cooked from scratch in their own kitchen using high-quality and fresh ingredients.

For owner Steve Greenberg, providing a quality product for high-end Boca residents motivated his entry into the gourmet pizza world nearly a decade ago. His small pizzeria offers gourmet toppings such as shrimp scampi.

Each restaurant offers a slightly different flavor and appeal to customers, but all rely on a formula of fresh ingredients and hot ovens to create a tastier pizza that isn't floating in grease by the time it reaches your table.

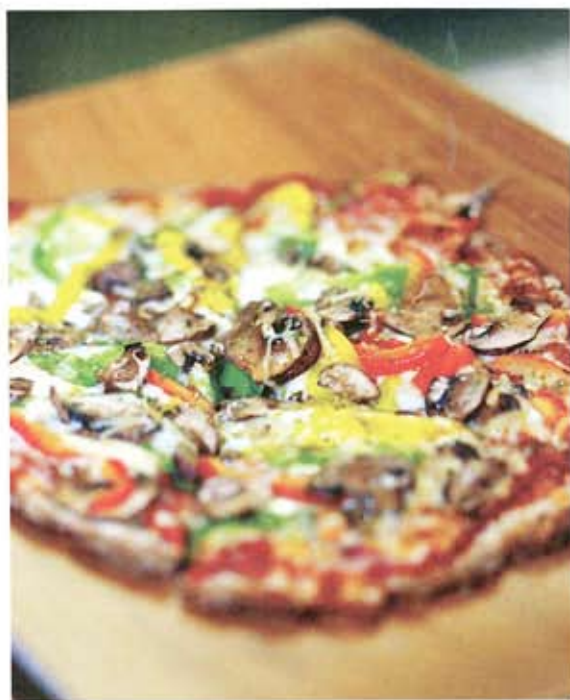
The quality ingredients and the hot ovens contribute to that, pizza makers say. Top-notch, homemade or organic mozzarella, for example, isn't as greasy to begin with as a cheap processed mozzarella that a chain might use.

Then, cooking it at high temperatures for just a few minutes prevents the separation of grease and cheese typical of many pizzas, plus it gives a crispier crust.

This new breed of upscale pizza places proves that good pies sell, regardless of the price—and regardless of the "3 for \$9" and similar ad campaigns run by big pizza chains. These high-end pizzerias reject the buy-one-get-one-free marketing approach favored by mass marketers.

"People are willing to pay for quality, whether it's pizza or steak," says Eric Haley, spokesman for Pizza Fusion, which is expanding into 15 states behind the motto: "Saving the Earth, One Pizza at a Time."

For Gary Rack, founder of Coal Mine Pizza, it was fulfilling a dream to open a restaurant that brought him to the industry.



A success in the prefabricated metal building industry, Rack wanted to run a neighborhood restaurant, where kids and grandparents, high-rollers and families from down the street all could gather for friendship, a good meal—and, of course, a fabulous glass of wine.

Rack lived in Boca Raton and decided to open right in his neighborhood. He lives about a mile from his restaurant, which recently began delivery service but does not do buy-one-get-one-free specials or other promotions associated with mass marketers.

Instead, Coal Mine offers a cozy environment with homemade mozzarella and special sauce all cooked in the old New York-style that Italian immigrants developed in the late 19th century when coal was cheap and plentiful. They used coal's intense heat to cook their breads and pizza crusts.

Rack chose the coal-fired oven for its unique flavor.

"The bottom is perfectly done and at the same time, it doesn't overcook the cheese," he explains.

And don't forget the lengthy wine list, which offers wine by the bottle or the quartino, about a third of a bottle. (Note that it's not sold by the glass.)

"The wine is very, very important," Rack says. "We're adamant about our staff knowing our wines."

He recommends a Cabernet Sauvignon or Brunello with a heavier pizza, the Melt in Your Mouth Meatball and Ricotta, for example, or a German Reisling with the Scampi or Brooklyn pizzas for the "unique freshness."

At Anthony's, the theory of freshness endures as well. Owner Anthony Bruno doesn't deliver pizzas, but he does post warnings in his restaurants: "Warning: Our Pizza is Well Done." Bruno boasts that there are no freezers in his pizzerias—everything is fresh.

Bruno, owner of Anthony's Runway 84 in Fort Lauderdale, started Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza because he was disappointed in the Gold Coast's pizza choices.

Fans of Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza include Miami Dolphins great Dan Marino. He liked the pies so much that he became an investor in the chain. There's even an eggplant pizza named for Marino on the menu.

Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza has locations in Fort Lauderdale, Coral Springs, Plantation, Pompano Beach, Weston, Boca Raton, Boynton Beach, Delray Beach, Palm Beach Gardens and Aventura.

Pizza Fusion founders Vaughan Lazar and Michael Gordon opened their first restaurant in 2006 simply to fill a void. Environmentally conscious and healthful, they ate organically at home but they struggled to maintain those values when they went out to eat.

"There were no environmentally friendly restaurants out there," Haley says.

Today, Pizza Fusion is setting the standards in the field by, for example, buying renewable energy certificates to offset all of the power use at its restaurants, using recycled materials in restaurant construction and filling its restaurants with recycled products, including pizza boxes and silverware made of potatoes that will decompose within 60 days. The stores even recycle the heat from their ovens as a water heater.

That type of commitment is paying off with others who are equally committed, Haley says.

"We get a lot of mothers who are very passionate about the environment, a lot of people who want to support a company that's doing the right thing for the environment, and they're voting with their dollars to support green businesses," he says.

Another passionate group, those with health conditions or lifestyles that limit what they can eat, is finding a home at Pizza Fusion, Haley says. The chain offers gluten-free crusts, vegan pizzas and mostly organic ingredients.

At Piola, an Italian chain with a pizzeria in Hallandale Beach, the selling point is a combination of continental panache, crispy pizzas cooked in a wood oven and bargain prices.

It's the rare upscale pizzeria to stress low prices. Its most expensive pie is \$14.95, and Piola even sells pizzas for \$6 between 5 and 6 pm, \$7 from 6 to 7 pm, and \$8 from 7 to 8 pm.

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TRENDY PIZZERIAS ON THE GOLD COAST SPECIALIZE IN A STYLE OF WOOD-FIRED PIES PIONEERED BY ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS IN NEW YORK IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY