

SPICE *it Up!*

Spicy pizzas burn up menus

Story by Katie Ayoub
Photos by Melissa Bean

A small-but-reverent segment of diners worship spice. They are the heat seekers — the ones that add hot sauce to scrambled eggs, and red-chili flakes to buttered noodles. It makes good business sense to satisfy this group by offering them a spicy pizza or two. Their loyalty runs as hot as a habañero.

But how do you find the right level of heat? One man's barnburner is another man's milk and cookies. Spicy pizzas with layered flavors deliver great balance, and avoid that one-note hit of overpowering intensity.

How do you let your customers know just how fiery that spicy black bean and jalapeño pizza is? Menu language seems to be key here.

For instance, at three-unit Tony Boomboss in Louisville, Kentucky, one medium-hot pizza is described as "zesty," while a more robust pizza is labeled "spicy."

"If it has a lot of heat, we tell them. We want them to know what they're getting into," says CEO and founder Tony Palombino.

The restaurant's best-selling specialty pizza is the "zesty" Chicken Fajita pizza. Diced onion, chipotle paste, banana



peppers and jalapeños are added to the house tomato sauce. Chicken pieces are marinated in pineapple juice, honey, cumin and coriander. Along with the chicken, fire-roasted green bell peppers and onions are laid out on this pizza, which won Pizza of the Year in 2005 at the International Pizza Expo in Las Vegas. It's then topped with Asiago and mozzarella cheese, and finished with diced Roma

tomatoes.

"The kicker with this pizza is the side of garlic sour cream that we serve with it," says Palombino. "We're giving them a whole fajita meal on a pizza, and the sour cream cools down the spice."

The spice level on this pie is medium, but can be increased upon request with the addition of more chipotle paste.

Tony Boomboss's Thai Chicken pizza used to be this

concept's worst performing specialty pizza. "I introduced it four years ago and it just didn't sell. Then California Pizza Kitchen came to town with its version. Suddenly, our sales went up. CPK validated what we were trying to do," says Palombino.

Now, it's ranked in the top five out of 12 specialty pizzas. Apart from growing familiarity hurried along by a large chain, this pizza's success comes



Buffalo Chicken Pizza

Yield: One 16-inch pizza

- 3 skinless, boneless chicken breast halves, cooked and cubed
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 ounces hot sauce
- Pizza dough
- 16 ounces bleu cheese dressing
- 8 ounces mozzarella cheese, shredded

- ❖ In a medium bowl, combine chicken, oil and hot sauce. Spread dressing over crust, then top with chicken mixture; sprinkle with shredded cheese.
- ❖ Bake in 425 F oven until crust is golden brown and cheese is bubbly, about 5 to 10 minutes. Let set a few minutes before slicing. Serve.

from its spicy flavor profile complemented by layered, balanced flavors.

“All our recipes are about looking for balance. This is a great example of how it all works together,” he says. “If it’s super hot, you can’t taste the contrast. You don’t want to have your mouth on fire.”

Its Thai Chicken pizza starts with a peanut sauce that includes roasted peanuts, garlic, several Thai chiles, ginger and sesame oil. The dough is then topped with grilled chicken, red onions, bean sprouts, shredded carrots and mozzarella cheese. It’s finished with chopped peanuts, then baked. The veggies offset the spice, and the chicken offers a sweet/hot note that works well, Palombino says.

“This is a spicy pizza, so we say that right on the menu. And we let them know when they’re ordering. But if they’re familiar with Thai food, they know what they’re getting into,” says Palombino.

At The Pizza Factory, a 50-seat shop in Princeton, Wisconsin, balance is the goal, too. “We don’t want to overpower; we want the heat and flavor to complement each other, not overwhelm. You don’t want to just taste the heat,” says Owner Bob Katerzynske.

For its Spicy Chicken Ranch pizza, the dough is spread with a cooling buttermilk ranch dressing, then topped with mozzarella. Chicken that’s been tossed in cayenne pepper and Tabasco is layered atop the cheese, then pepperoncini and oregano finish the pie.

“The ranch balances the heat with a cool flavor. It is a spicy pizza, and we label it as a spicy pizza,” says Katerzynske.

An even spicier pizza is The Pizza Factory’s Mexican pizza, which sports a hot salsa as its tomato sauce. Cheddar, tomato, onion and jalapeño are added, as well as either ground beef or chicken. The pizza is

finished with black olives. Once it comes out of the oven, the palate-cooling ingredients of chopped lettuce, guacamole and sour cream are added.

“This pizza has some faithful customers. It’s fairly popular. All your spicy pizzas are becoming more popular. People are looking for pizza with a bite,” he says. ❖

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