DINING

California Pizza Kitchen cuts out a share of the pie

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

Two former California law partners have cut themselves a slice of the Detroit-area gourmet pizza market.

Creating competition for Mike Ilitch's America's Pizza Cafe, Larry Flax and Rick Rosenfield have opened a California Pizza Kitchen in Somerset Collection North in Troy, its first in Michigan.

"We tend to locate ourselves in upscale suburban communities where there's high-traffic shopping and a residential community so that we can apply to both day parts – the shopper during the day or the businessperson who wants to grab a quick lunch, and a family that wants to get a bite to eat. It's a great place to take your family," said Sarah A. Goldsmith, vice president of public relations and advertising.

"Troy, Michigan, really got at each one of these specific requirements," she added.

CPK has been open for four months offering 27 different kinds of pizzas on standard dough or honey-wheat dough. The pizzas are "wood-fired," meaning they are cooked for approximately three minutes in wood-burning stoves. Taking vegetarians and those with food allergies into consideration, any of the pizzas may be ordered cheeseless or meatless.

California Pizza Kitchen

Where: Somerset Collection North, 2800 W. Big Beaver (at Coolidge Highway), Troy.
Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays.
11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.
Noon to 9 p.m. Sundays.
Credit: All major credit cards are accepted.
Information: (810) 816-0900.

Individual pizzas range from the traditional (five-cheese and tomato, vegetarian, traditional cheese, and fresh tomato) to more daring choices (Thai chicken, tandoori chicken, tostada pizza, and grilled burrito pizzas).

"We have something for everyone," Flax said. "Even the traditionalist will find a sausage and pepperoni pizza, while vegetarians and those who have dietary restrictions can choose from meatless, cheeseless pizzas."

Besides pizza, CPK also offers an array of salads available in half orders (California vegetable salad, field greens salad, romaine and watercress salad), sandwiches made with herb-onion focaccia loaves (vegetarian, chicken, grilled rosemary chicken and chicken sausage and peppers), and 17 made-to-order pastas (ginger black bean angel hair, Kung Pao spaghetti, fettuccine with roasted garlic cream sauce, and jambalaya linguine with chicken or shrimp).

Appetizers include Tuscan hummus and CPK'sadillas made with grilled eggplant, wild and domestic mushrooms, fresh tomato and basil or black beans, poblano chilies and cilantro.

Menu prices range from $2.95 to $4.95 for appetizers, $2.25 to $3.95 for soup, $3.95 to $9.95 for salads, $5.95 to $9.95 for pizzas, $5.95 to $10.50 for pastas, $5.95 to $6.95 for sandwiches, and $1.95 to $4.50 for desserts.

Flax, the former assistant chief of the criminal division for the U.S. Department of Justice in Los Angeles, and Rosenfield, a former attorney for the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., opened their first restaurant in Beverly Hills, Calif., in March 1985. (America's Pizza Cafe's original location in Southfield opened in 1989.) Now the company has 77 restaurants in 19 states.

"We've always loved food," Rosenfield said. "Because we offered legal counsel on a national level, we traveled quite a bit and we were exposed to a lot of great foods and wines. We have explored regional tastes across America while traveling for business and for pleasure."

Goldsmith described the duo's goal in opening the eateries.

"They took familiar flavors and tastes you've probably eaten in another form and translated it on to the pizza crust. Once you understand that theory, it's (the different flavors) not that unusual. What Rick and Larry do is watch flavors and food trends around the country and around the world."

Similar to America's Pizza Cafes, the focal point of the restaurant is the open-air kitchen with a few ovens. With its bright colors and lighting, the company calls the atmosphere an "upbeat, casual California-style environment."

Goldsmith said that the menu is 90 percent different than when the first eatery was opened and the items continue to evolve. After all, there's a world of ingredients and flavors that can top a pizza.

"The pizza is the canvas, and you can paint on it all day long," Flax said.

STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN STORMZAND

Makin' pizzas: *Adrian Lozano, general manager of the Somerset Collection's California Pizza Kitchen store, shows off a couple of his pizza pies.*

ARTBEAT

Art Beat features various happenings in the suburban arts world. Send news leads to: Mary Klemic, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham 48009, or fax (810) 644-1314.

SUNDAYS AT THE BBAA

The "Sundays at the BBAA" literary series, hosted by poet Margo LaGattuta, continues this month with Michigan poet Mary Ann Wehler. The reading and book party will be 2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 26, in the main gallery of the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association, 1516 S. Cranbrook Road in Birmingham. Wehler's new book, "Walking Through Deep Snow," has just been published by Plain View Press in Austin, Texas. Come and hear a moving and heartfelt reading by a contemporary poet who began her successful writing career late in life. Books will be available for purchase. Call (810) 644-0866.

BEAD CLASSES

Make button pins with crystal dangles, or a large bead necklace with multi strands, through classes offered by the Great Lakes Beadworkers Guild. The button pin class will take place Friday, Jan. 24; cost is $35 and kit fee is $15. The necklace class will take place Saturday, Jan. 25; cost is $55 and kit fee is $30. For information, call Beads SRO at (810) 542-1348.

AT EXPO

Russell Cobane of Clarkston returns to the Northern Wildlife Art Expo this weekend as the Encore Artist. His lush paintings have gained him international fame since he was the 1996 Featured Artist. The Expo will take place Friday-Sunday, Jan. 24-26, in the Lansing Center in Lansing. It will feature exhibits, artists, competitions, a celebrity quick draw and auction, and seminars including sessions on conservation and the environment. Hours are 5-9 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday. Admission is $6 for adults, $5 for senior citizens, free for under age 12. Tickets are honored all weekend. The Expo donates a portion of admission and sale of the Official Expo Original to the Michigan State University Wildlife Rehabilitation Center to help provide medical care for Michigan's injured wildlife. Call (517) 788-6044 for information.

MEET THE ARTIST

The Farmington Artists Club is having a "Meet the Artist" Day 2 p.m. every Saturday through February for a watercolor exhibit of Leon Schoichit's artistry. The showing is at the Farmington Public Library at 23550 Liberty, near Farmington Road and Grand River. Library hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, 1-5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday.

AERO HONOR

Aviation photographer Philip Handleman of Birmingham has won a major award in the world's most prestigious annual aerospace photography competition. His photograph captured first place in the general category of the 1996 Aviation Week & Space Technology Photo Contest.

The winning photo depicts the official aerial demonstration team of the Canadian Forces, the Snowbirds, executing a nine-ship formation pass at the Reno Air Races. Handleman shot this dramatic maneuver while covering the famed air racing and air show event Sept. 12 in Nevada.

WORKSHOPS

The Paint Creek Center for the Arts offers papermaking and black and white photography workshops for adults. Call (810) 651-4110 for information.

Explore the process of papermaking using plant fibers 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 31. Registration deadline is Friday, Jan. 24. The four-session photography workshop will take place 7-9 p.m. Tuesdays, Feb. 4 and 11, and 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturdays, Feb. 8 and 15. Learn the fundamentals of black and white photography from developing to printing with intensive darkroom operation. Registration deadline is Tuesday, Jan. 28.

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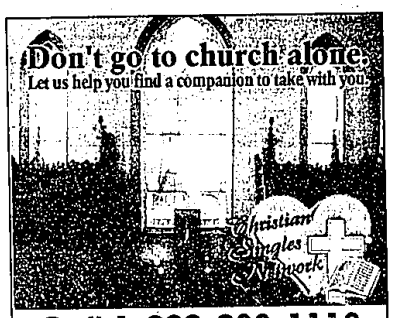

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