

DINING OUT

Pizza, with style

California Pizza Kitchen serves up gourmet fare in new Livonia location

BY MARY QUINLEY
SPECIAL WRITER

What happens when two defense lawyers, who are also pals, decide to get out of the courtroom and into the kitchen?

In the case of Larry Flax and Rick Rosenfield the verdict was a happy one. In 1985 the pair founded a chain of eateries called California Pizza Kitchen. Two months ago, they opened a restaurant at Laurel Park Place in Livonia, their 132nd location.

"Our restaurants are great for families," said Flax, co-owner of California Pizza Kitchen, who described the atmosphere as casual with an emphasis on a more upscale setting. CPK was the first major restaurant chain to initiate a smoke-free policy.

The eatery appeals to a broad range of people. It is not unusual to see three and four generations of families dining together. So, yes — bring the kids.

"They (kids) are just as important to us as customers are the parents," Flax said. The restaurant has a food bar where youngsters love to sit and watch the

California Pizza Kitchen

Where: 37546 Six Mile Rd., Livonia, (734) 591-0476
Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Sunday

Menu: Appetizers, made-to-order hearth-baked pizzas, salads, pastas, sandwiches and desserts. Children, age 10 and younger, can order pizza, pasta or a salad and a drink for \$4.99. Beer and wine available

Cost: The average check runs \$11 per person
Credit cards: All major credit cards

Other locations: 2800 W. Big Beaver Rd., Troy, (248) 816-0900; 870 Briarwood Circle, Briarwood Mall, Ann Arbor, (734) 222-6320; hours are the same as the Livonia location

food preparation.

The menu features a variety of appetizers, soups, salads, more than two dozen pizzas, pastas and sandwiches. Sesame Ginger Chicken Dumplings, Tuscan Hummus, a Spinach Artichoke Dip and three varieties of Tortilla Spring Rolls highlight the appetizer choices.

"The first barbecued chicken pizza was created in our restaurant," said Flax.

It's listed as The Original BBQ Chicken on the menu, and, ranks as the chain's most popular pizza. Ingredients include barbecue sauce, smoked Gouda and

Mozzarella cheeses, barbecued chicken, sliced red onions and cilantro.

Other pizza possibilities run the gamut from the Traditional Cheese to a Vegetarian with Japanese Eggplant, Philly Cheesesteak, Hawaiian, Mushroom Pepperoni Sausage and the Grilled Garlic Shrimp.

The Tandoori Chicken pizza, topped with pieces of chicken marinated in Indian spices and decorated with splashes of zucchini, yellow squash and a spicy tomato-yogurt curry, is served with a side of mango chutney.

Flax confesses that he is par-

tial to the BLT pizza.

However, he said, the Jamaican Jerk Chicken is "running a close second." This pizza, topped with spiced chicken breast, a spicy sweet Caribbean sauce, Mozzarella Cheese, smoked bacon, onions, roasted red and yellow peppers, and scallions is one of the newest items on the menu.

Customers who prefer an Italian-style, thin crisp pizza have three options. Upon request, pizzas can be prepared with honey-wheat dough.

When patrons can't decide whether to try the Potato Leek, Soda White Corn Tortilla or the Dakota Smashed Pea & Barley soup, a great alternative is to order the Two in a Bowl.

A combination of any two soups is served side by side in the same bowl.

Pasta lover selections include at least a dozen choices.

Fettuccine with Garlic Cream Sauce, Broccoli/Sun-dried Tomato Fusilli and Bolognese Penna are just a few.

Recently, Charis Lyon and her friend, Amy Childs met for dinner at California Pizza Kitchen.

"Everything was delicious," said Lyon of Westland, who sampled several menu items.

One of her favorites was The Original BBQ Chicken pizza.

She also tried the Oriental Chicken salad.

It's mixed with shredded lettuce and crispy angel hair, tossed with a spicy sweet-and-sour sesame dressing, julienne carrots, scallions and basil, and then topped with strips of grilled chicken.

Most of the salads are available as a half order.

Lyon said that she usually doesn't care for spicy foods. However she liked the Tai Chicken pizza that is prepared with spicy peanut-ginger and sesame sauce.

"California Pizza Kitchen will be one of my favorite take out restaurants," said Lyon, who works just minutes away at Valassis in Livonia.

Amy Childs of Westland, who is a teacher for the Wayne/Westland schools, also enjoyed "the great flavor of the combination of the chicken and the barbecue" on The Original pizza.

Both women described the Key Lime Pie as "incredible." Apple

Crisp, Caramel Fudge Pecan Cheesecake and Tiramisu also are featured as desserts.

Childs was impressed with the service. The wait staff, she said, seemed to be well informed about the menu choices.

"Training is everything," said Flax, referring to his staff.

Prospective CPK employees are required to participate in classroom sessions. The wait staff takes five written tests plus a final exam with 200 questions.

Cooks also require extensive testing.

A segment of their training includes preparation of eight pizzas (excluding bake time) within seven minutes.

"We don't rush. We really take our time before opening a restaurant," said Flax.

Key elements to the success of the business, he said, are quality, value, service and cleanliness.

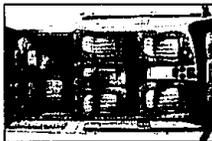
Mary Quinley is a Livonia resident and writes about food and travel for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. You can reach her at Mqinfo@aol.com.

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