



## [1-ON-1 WITH PIZZA LEADERSHIP](#)

# Smokin' Oak Wood Fired Pizza & Taproom pairs 2 perennial favorites

What goes better with pizza than beer? At Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza and Taproom, guests can enjoy both with a self-serve taproom designed to give guests a taste or a whole pint.



Provided

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Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza & Tap Room combines two perennial favorites — pizza and beer — in a way that's new to the market and helps the brand stand out in a crowded field.

Linda Black started the company in Rochester, Minnesota, under the name of Pi Wood-Fired Pizza back in 2009. Black developed the menu, the concept and

the operations of the restaurant. Meanwhile, Matt Mongoven had been working in London in the banking industry before returning home to the States. They thought expanding Black's pizza concept would be a great opportunity, so they created the Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza & Taproom brand and opened up the first franchised unit in 2017.

There are five Smokin' Oak pizzerias open, and five more expected to open within the next four months. Smokin' Oak is modeled after Pi Wood Fired Pizza, but the two remain separate entities. Four of the five are franchised, with one unit corporate owned.



*Matt Mongoven, CEO of Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza & Taproom*

Company leaders had put in order all the documents needed to franchise early on and worked on employee training before franchising, a move Mongoven said took 12 months to complete. They put every part of the restaurant process in writing by working with an outside consultant with the expectations of franchising.

"We felt really comfortable that even with just one location, we had a concept and a menu that was replicable in other markets," Mongoven said in a phone interview. He acts as CEO of the company.

### **On the menu**

The menu is simple: a few starters, three salads, 12 signature pizzas (of course, customers can build their own) and a handful of desserts.

Dough and most of the sauces are made in-house. Vegetables are chopped throughout the day, "and that's not just a marketing spin," Mongoven said. "We actually bring all of our vegetables in whole and we chop them in the restaurant. We're even taking corn off the cob and we're shucking it. "

Many of the meats — like chicken, chorizo and sausage — are roasted in the wood-fired oven early in the morning, "and it's that sort of care that goes into the freshness of the food that we have," Mongoven said. "We don't have freezers in our restaurants. We just believe that with fresh food and great care in how we prepare that food, the guest is going to be able to taste the difference."

There are 12 signature pizzas, including the fan-favorite Classic featuring oven roasted Italian sausage, fresh sliced pepperoni, cremini mushrooms, red onion and topped with freshly grated mozzarella. A Buffalo Chicken pizza is topped with oven roasted chicken, banana peppers, homemade bleu cheese dressing, a raspberry sauce and green onions.

The dough was designed for the wood-fired oven and can be used not only for pizza and garlic cheese bread but also for a wood-fired apple pie and cinnamon knots on the dessert menu. The wood-fired oven is the only cooking utensil in the restaurants. There's no fryers, microwaves, ovens or freezers.

"What's important to us is really simplicity for our franchisees," Mongoven said. "If they can master our menu items, then they can replicate that and they can teach their team members to do a fantastic job. At the end of the day, our menu is tight, but we do it well."

Smokin' Oak doesn't use a commissary, so they rely on a solid foundation with their national food supplier that provides dough packets, for instance, so the dough is the same in Grand Junction, Colorado, as it is in Omaha, Nebraska. Having good relationships with their franchisees, and the franchisees in turn with their staff, ensures consistency across the brand.

## **Bottom's up**

And then there's the taproom.

"As we began to expand the concept, I really just fell in love with the idea of self-serve taprooms. It's really such a cool concept," Mongoven said. The amount of taps on the wall depends on the size of the restaurant.

Here's how it works: a guest goes through the fast casual line and orders food. The cashier asks if he or she would like to use the taproom wall. The guest is then given an RFID-enabled wristband and then heads for the taproom wall, which has 25 to 45 taps. The guest is able to sip a craft beer, cocktail or wine in as little as a tasting or as much as a full glass by tapping their bracelet on a sensor.

"It's great for the guest who wants to try maybe an ounce of something to see if they like it, or if they know they like that beer, they can have a whole pint," Mongoven said. "What we've found is it really elevated the entire guest experience because we're pairing our great wood-fired pizza along with our great guest service and great environment, but then you (add in) this concept of fun, family and friends at the tap room wall. It really creates a cool atmosphere."



They opted for fast casual over full service to allow the guest to set the pace of their dining experience.

"It's fantastic for the person who's on a lunch break (and) they have 20 minutes, and they want a pizza and a soda," Mongoven said. "They can get that for \$13, \$14. Instead of going into a fast-food restaurant, they can come into a great environment. ... They're getting an experience at the same price point as if they were going through a drive-thru at a fast-food restaurant."

Technology also plays a big part in overall operations. They have a full intranet system that houses everything from operations manuals to the brand's how-to videos that teach employees how to cut, say, chicken into uniform pieces and making sure that there's consistency in every bite.

## **Expansion plans**

Now that systems are in place and franchising has begun, the brand is ready for large-scale growth. Within the next six months, new Smokin' Oaks will be open in Florida, Texas, Arkansas, Ohio, and a second unit in Grand Junction, Colorado. The brand also recently signed a deal for Dallas, Texas.

Smokin' Oak uses developer groups to market the company's franchising and uses SEO for organic franchise lead generations.

Mongoven calls Smokin' Oak a "niche" market for those looking to get into the fast-casual pizza space.

"It's wood-fired pizza, but then when you pair it with the self-serve taproom, it just makes for an exponential guest experience," he added.