



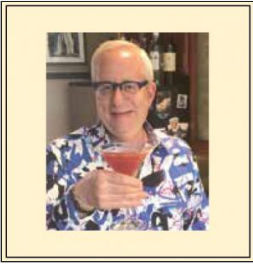
Making Pizza Extreme

By David Landis—

You’ve heard of extreme skiing, and extreme snowboarding. But **Extreme Pizza**?

That’s the brainchild of **Extreme Pizza CEO Todd Parent**, who has guided this company devoted to the beloved Italian pies through 27 years of growth with more than 20 locations nationwide. Well, it was his idea—and his sister’s! More on that later.

It all began in a small shop on Fillmore Street in San Francisco’s lower Pacific Heights. I had the pleasure of speaking with Todd recently for the ***San Francisco Bay Times*** and here’s what he had to say:



Gay Gourmet: What made you decide to open Extreme Pizza 27 years ago? Where was the first store?

Todd Parent: Fillmore was our first store—it’s still there. It’s my baby. It’s great to have your pride and joy open. The lower Fillmore is the “in” spot now; it was a blessing that we got to open there. You really get to know your customers by name. That makes it special in business.

Gay Gourmet: What’s your personal history? And, do you have a favorite sport?

Todd Parent: Many moons ago, I studied abroad in Paris. During that time, I was able to experience crepe stands on every corner. That was what you ate for many meals. That was the initial idea—the seed was to bring crepes back to the U.S. and open up crepe stands in fun places: mountain towns, surf towns, etc. I participated in surfing and wind surfing and skiing and snowboarding growing up. I wanted to bring those passions together; that was my dream.

After I graduated college, I worked for the U.S. Trust in New York. We focused on entrepreneurs who were wealthy and managed their money. Speaking to interesting, smart people—talking to them about how they built their businesses—got me thinking: there are many other opportunities. That was the impetus that motivated me to start my own business.

My sister lived out in California. I decided to drive across the country and I stopped to see a friend in Colorado. The weekend I was there, they got 10 feet of snow. I had a great long weekend skiing and then stayed for a season and another summer—and another year. I was transitioning from Wall Street to restaurant groups that included the Chart House, the Mother Lode, and working for the Aspen Ski organization in their hospitality division ... dabbling in the restaurant business as an employee. I thought, “Maybe I can eventually start my own business one day?”

I got a bit landlocked after a while, but loved the water sports. So, then I drove out to California in mid 1993. One of the first places I visited was Noah’s Bagels; at that time, Noah’s had 2 locations. I thought, “This is a great concept, something I had been thinking about.” I applied for a job at Noah’s and started baking bagels at Chestnut Street and Laurel Village. I brought them expertise I had learned along the way to establish some good systems and processes to make it more efficient. One of the owners, Dan Alper, said he was opening up a ton of locations and asked if I would like to be a part of the expansion. I said, “Sounds great,” but I explained what I was thinking about. “By all means, I get it if that’s what your dream is,” he said.

I was also taking a class at the California Culinary Academy for pizzas and calzones, learning different techniques. We experimented with different pizzas and doughs—some of the different toppings and recipes were sauces I experimented with elsewhere. I put them on to our pizzas in this class. I took some of those ideas and created new pizzas and the chef told me, “You’re onto something. We’ve never seen pizzas like this.”

I got back in touch with my sister and wrote a business plan, but not [with] specifics about what the restaurant would be. My sister said, “Todd, you love extreme sports, you love great food, you’re taking a class at the Academy in designer pizza—you should start **Extreme Pizza**.”

The light bulb went off. Once that name popped up, I honed the business plan to what became **Extreme Pizza**. The first version of Extreme Pizza 1.0 was a complete failure; many businesses wind up that way. We offered “Take and Bake” pizzas primarily and didn’t do any delivery. Customers didn’t even know what to do with the unbaked pizza. The “Take and Bake” concept was unknown and under-appreciated.

I learned that you have to pivot quickly or you’re out of business. We started baking slices and that caught on—they bake pretty quickly. Then, customers wanted pizzas delivered. I’m proud to give credit to our customers—a significant portion of our menu has been “developed” by our customers. Customers make recommendations and some have even shared their family recipes with us, which have been great new additions to our menu and frankly some of our best sellers. We call our employees “The Extreme Team,” and our staff have created great sandwiches, salads—my new favorite is the Spice Route, a tandoori-flavored chicken pizza. Listening to those around you who have good ideas allows you to continue to be innovative. Our team has had great technology advances that have helped us navigate to get to where we are now.





The Screamin' Tomato



The Yardsale



Gay Gourmet: What makes Extreme Pizza different from other pizzerias?

Todd Parent: Kudos to all of my colleagues—building a company culture with passion. We call it the Extreme Team because everyone matters. You listen to everyone. When you truly care about any suggestion, that is an important thing; it's an important relationship building opportunity. That has been one of the great things: to listen, to do research and development, with a lot of effort.

We also pivot and change; we're not set in our ways. We're always trying to push the creative palate and make new creations: the sauces, the combinations of toppings. Allowing everyone to be involved is a collaboration between employees, customers, you name it. We differentiate our brand through our menu offerings. During the pandemic, we changed up all of our salads, offering great new ideas.

Being inspired by our competitors makes us better. You have to have great service and consistency. There's a lot to be said about great purveyors. From day one, we have tried to source locally. We support our local farmers (produce and meat); that's been a behind-the-scenes objective of ours. Building those

relationships helps everyone innovate. Being able to choose from signature pizzas or create your own—we can bake them, you can get slices, you can do “Take and Bake,” you can do it for a party or in-home. To the best of our team’s ability, we’re trying to give customers what they want.

Gay Gourmet: Where do you source your ingredients?

Todd Parent: Our purveyors include local folks such as: Stanislaus for pizza sauce, tomatoes from Modesto; Raymond’s for artisan sourdough bread and sweet rolls from San Francisco; Silva Sausage for linguica from Gilroy; local craft beer always on tap from Altamont, East Brother, and Trumer from the Bay Area; Bay Area Herbs for basil and assorted fresh herbs & spices from San Francisco; D’Arrigo Brothers—founded in 1923 by three brothers in Salinas Valley—for produce and fresh veggies; Saputo Brothers for mozzarella cheese from Tulare; and Gayles Barbecue Sauce of Beverly Hills.

Gay Gourmet: I like the “customize your pizza” option Extreme offers customers. How did you come up with that idea?

Todd Parent: Other pizzerias have 4–6 pizzas on the menu and “this is what you get.” A company called **North Beach Pizza** had a few locations—they were one of the pizzerias that allowed you to pick and choose toppings. Through researching, we decided to allow for “build your own creations.”

Gay Gourmet: Were you the first to offer “Take and Bake”?

Todd Parent: There were a couple of pizza places in Portland that did “Take and Bake.” That’s where I first experienced it. Now, **Papa Murphy’s** is one of the largest pizza companies in the world—and they primarily focus on “Take and Bake” pizzas. We knew this could be a great thing.

Gay Gourmet: How many stores are there now? Do you have plans for further expansion? Why did you choose the franchise model?

Todd Parent: We never really set out to be the biggest. We wanted to be the best. Franchising came about in a roundabout way. San Francisco is a very touristy area. When tourists would find their way to **Extreme Pizza**, they asked if they could open up a store in their hometown. Franchising came about because of the inquiries. We started to do our homework and figure out how to help them and allow them to open.

You can expand through private equity or venture capital, cash flow or licensing and franchising. Franchising rose to the top. We wanted to stay true to our core objectives, including franchisees. We wanted likeminded, dedicated folks who would treat this as something we’re trying to build. Personality and experience had a key role in finding the next right person.

Gay Gourmet: How big is your catering business?

Todd Parent: Through the pandemic, our customers have been donating pizzas to first responders, namely police [and] fire departments, hospitals. That’s been our true catering throughout the pandemic. We’re getting interest from businesses coming back to work now and the catering will continue to ramp up.



Gay Gourmet: Philanthropy has always been a big part of your corporate culture. Tell me a little bit about that and how you choose whom to support.

Todd Parent: Very broadly, there's no one we don't support. We almost never say no. We look through all the different businesses we have donated to—nonprofits and needy organizations. We have tallied it as more than \$1 million in in-kind donations. More important than the dollar amount, we try to help people in need; we do it day in, day out without looking for the glory. We want to give back to the community. This pandemic has shown that in spades. It's part of our DNA and culture.

Gay Gourmet: What's your most popular pizza? And what's your personal favorite pizza?

Todd Parent: Popular? It changes from market to market and location to location. South of Market/Potrero Hill might like something different than folks in the Marina. I'm a fan of the Pandora's Box (Mediterranean pizza) and the Spice Route pizza (chicken marinated in a spicy Tandoori sauce, green pepper, red onion, cilantro, and mozzarella). Those are two of my favorites. Customer favorites: Drag It Through the Garden (with at least six veggies), The Yard Sale (Italian sausage, pepperoni, salami, and veggies); some of our chicken pizzas rise to the top as well. There's something on the menu for everyone.

The Gay Gourmet will vouch for that. One of the best things about **Extreme Pizza** is the selection: it's not your Italian Mama's pizzeria. In addition to The Spice Route and The Yard Sale, their pizzas include The Bunny Slope (light tomato sauce, mozzarella, pine nuts, mini heirloom tomatoes, goat cheese, and arugula dressed with white balsamic vinegar, olive oil, salt, and pepper), The Screamin' Tomato (mini heirloom tomatoes, garlic, fresh basil, grated and fresh mozzarella with optional balsamic glaze or tomato sauce), Peace in the Middle East (homemade hummus, vine ripe tomatoes, Kalamata olives, caramelized onions, feta, fresh basil, pepperoncini, and mozzarella), and much more.

Truth be told, I've been going to **Extreme Pizza** since they opened in 1994 (when I used to live on lower Fillmore Street). This time, my husband and I tried the customized "Take and Bake" option, but you can also pick it up already baked or have it delivered. We started with the Broken Wedge Salad, a variation on the traditional wedge, with the iceberg lettuce already chopped up for easier eating, along with smoked bacon, Gorgonzola cheese, fresh, chopped mini tomatoes (a great idea!), and blue cheese dressing. Their blue cheese dressing is a thing of wonder: most have too much "creamy" and not enough "blue cheese," but Extreme Pizza's blends both beautifully. The salad was fresh, crisp, and delicious.

Our pizza was a customized option: a Screamin' Tomato (margherita) pizza, thin crust, with extra mozzarella (yes, you can ask for and get it, right online), Italian sausage, mushrooms, and red onions. They're easy to bake (the instructions are on the box and also on the website) and they come out piping hot from your oven. The crust was crisp, the sausage savory, and the veggies tasted as if they were right off the farm. We were impressed by the innovative toppings and creations; it's not your normal pizzeria. Along with **Delfina** and **North Beach Pizza**, **Extreme Pizza** is one of the city's top three pizzerias.

Returning to some more questions, I had to ask Todd, "What are some of your other favorite San Francisco Restaurants?"



Todd Parent: There are so many new ones. My go-to places are **Tacolicious** and **Papalote Mexican Grill**. Other pizza places I like are **Pizzeria Delfina** and **Giorgio's** on Clement. I love **Hillstone** on the Embarcadero—their service and attention to detail and food quality is unsurpassed. They treat everyone amazingly well. I love **Wayfare Tavern** as well. There are so many great spots in San Francisco.

Gay Gourmet: Finally, what's next?

Todd Parent: We'll be opening 4–5 new locations, despite all the challenges. We're optimistic and driven to expand the business in a modest way. Some of the openings have been pushed back. We are opening in the Capitol Hill area of Washington, D.C.; after that, we have another location in the suburbs of Boise—Melba, ID; and after that, we'll be re-opening the Shattuck Avenue location in Berkeley. That building was demolished and it's been re-built—probably March/April. And another store in Livermore is just breaking ground.

So, The Gay Gourmet recommends that you go to extremes, especially when selecting your pizzeria. Extreme isn't just for sports anymore.

Speaking of pizzas, classic Detroit pizza restaurant **Joyride Pizza** has introduced a new plant-based menu of square pan vegan pizzas at its two San Francisco locations (Yerba Buena Gardens & Valencia Street) featuring artisanal ingredients for four delicious pizzas. Joyride Pizza brings the largest selection of plant-based Detroit pan pies to San Francisco with the same dedication to quality and flavor as their beloved meat & cheese pizza menu.

Worth watching is **Birch & Rye**, a “modern Russian kitchen” from chef/owner Anya El-Wattar, which will open in Noe Valley in February. According to the restaurant, the new venue will “explore the myriad flavors of Russian cuisine, viewed through a California lens that brings vibrant seasonal ingredients to the fore.” The menu takes a historical bent, focusing on food from Czarist Russia as well as the former Soviet Union. Taking center stage are special house-made vodka infusions. The restaurant will also spotlight the country’s many regional cuisines.

I’ve just learned about **Gong cha Bubble Tea**, which has a location near Union Square, one in Oakland, and nine locations in the South Bay. The chain brews fresh tea every four hours in each store. It’s the first bubble tea brand to introduce a signature milk foam topping and releases new limited-time seasonal specials quarterly.

Dumpling Time’s newest outpost (and its first South Bay location) is slated to open this month at Santana Row in San Jose. A part of the Omakase Restaurant Group, Dumpling Time is known for its delicious homemade dumplings.

From the restaurateur who gave San Francisco one of our most popular brunch spots with its signature Millionaire’s Bacon®, Hoyul Steven Choi expands his brunch and dinner empire throughout California. He’s opening new **Sweet Maple** restaurants in Palo Alto, Cupertino, Walnut Creek, and Santa Monica, as well as a new **Kitchen Story + U Dessert Story** in Mountain View and on Taraval Street (San Francisco).

According to *The San Francisco Chronicle*, the **Cliff House** building is on track to potentially open with a new restaurant as soon as later this year. The National Park Service has begun its formal leasing process and hopes to make a decision by summer about a new operator.

Chef Fico, **Burma Superstar**, **Barebottle Brewing Company**, and five others are among the big restaurant names set to populate a splashy new mixed-use Menlo Park development on El Camino Real called **Springline**. Opening is set for some time later this year.

And finally: I’m proud to announce that the **Gay Gourmet** has been asked to judge the nationally prestigious but LA-based **Taste Awards**, honoring the best television, film, and online programs devoted to food, fashion, and lifestyle. May the judging begin!

- Extreme Pizza:** <https://www.extremepizza.com/>
- Joyride Pizza:** <https://www.joyridepizza.com/>
- Birch & Rye:** <https://birchandryesf.com/>
- Gong cha Bubble Tea:** <https://gong-cha-usa.com/>
- Dumpling Time:** <https://dumplingtime.com/>
- Sweet Maple:** <http://www.sweetmaplesf.com/>
- Kitchen Story:** <http://www.kitchenstorysf.com/>
- U Dessert Story:** <http://udessertstorysf.com/>
- The Taste Awards:** <http://www.thetasteawards.com/>
- Springline:** <https://springline.com/>
- National Park Service applications:** <https://tinyurl.com/2p8abnya>

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