

To the Extreme

Extreme Pizza reinvents the pizza industry with extreme sports, gourmet pizza and creativity in marketing and service. It's growing fast. **BY KIRSTEN SRINIVASAN**

● EXTREME PIZZA

WWW.EXTREMEPIZZA.COM

SALES: \$12 MILLION

HEADQUARTERS: SAN FRANCISCO

EMPLOYEES: 350

SPECIALTY: GOURMET PIZZA AND OTHER PRODUCTS

TODD PARENT, PRESIDENT AND CEO: "IT'S A HANDS-ON, LEADERSHIP BY EXAMPLE ORGANIZATION."



EXPERIENCES AT CREPE SHOPS IN PARIS, WALL STREET AND A SURF shop all helped President and CEO Todd Parent dream up his Extreme Pizza concept. He was first inspired by crepe shops while studying abroad, and then by the lifestyle of working at a surfboard and windsurfing shop.

"I saw the entrepreneurial spirit," he says. "It was appealing working for them. Everyone had a strong work ethic, [and] flexible hours certainly allowed time for extreme activities. We could surf any time we wanted. That was my first introduction to a small business doing something out of the ordinary and creating something great."

At first, he wanted to bring crepes to America, but decided the trend wouldn't last and, after all, people always enjoy pizza. "After winding down my career in finance and money management in New York, I looked for a restaurant group in New Jersey and worked my way up from the bottom. Washing dishes, prepping food, sous chef, line cook - I did whatever it takes."

For the next five years, Parent worked at various restaurants and food concepts before joining Noah's Bagels in San Francisco and moving up the ranks. Noah's eventually merged with Einstein's Bagels. While working at Noah's, he wrote the business plan for Extreme Pizza and found himself at a crossroads. "The owners of Noah's were good mentors and sources of support," he says. "They said, 'If you don't try it now, you might not ever have this opportunity again.' They were kind and willing to introduce me to contacts in San Francisco."

Ten years later, Extreme Pizza has annual revenues approaching \$12 million with four corporately owned stores in the San Francisco Bay area and 17 franchise locations throughout the country. It plans to open two new corporate stores in 2005. Additionally, Parent anticipates opening 10 to 12 more fran-

chise units this year. The company's goal is to open at least 10 stores annually and reach a total of 50 stores in two years.

The restaurant's theme is extreme sports. Its gourmet pizzas have unique names, such as the Holy Cow cheese pizza and the Yard Sale, which has a little of everything. Although service is quick, he says, Extreme Pizza keeps customers entertained while they wait. Flatscreen TVs feature windsurfing, kite boarding, snowboarding, skiing and other action.

Extreme Pizza was one of the first companies to co-brand with the X-Games. "We continue to sponsor the athletes individually," Parent notes. "They come into our locations, tell their story, speak with customers and employees about their exciting lifestyle and what they are doing."

The company continues to seek out unique marketing opportunities while taking an active role in the community. Extreme Pizza is an approved vendor for the city of San Francisco and often provides food to the police and fire departments. During recent protests against the war in Iraq, Extreme Pizza was one of the police department's first calls, Parent says.

Extreme Pizza donates pizzas to help volunteers and charitable organizations. The restaurants also host field trips that teach grade school children the basics of pizza making.

The pizza industry has traditionally been low-tech in terms of equipment, Parent says, but that is changing. "In San Francisco, in the heart of the technology world - Silicon Valley - we are implementing technological advantages such as Web ordering," Parent notes.

The company is experimenting with automated telephone ordering, which allows customers to skip through a hold queue to expedite their orders. The market is becoming more technology driven behind the scenes, as well, he says. With the

intranet, the company is able to communicate sales and marketing information, and critical data points more seamlessly.

Extreme Pizza is also staying innovative with its food, he states. "Not only do we do research and development, we also allow our customers to create new pizzas and recipes for our daily and weekly specials," Parent says.

For example, a customer created the Poultry Geist, a chicken pizza, with white sauce. "It's ghost white," Parent states. "Everything about it worked. It's very unique and creative, and one of our top sellers now. It has been a very great tool and mechanism for us. There are probably five - if not 10 - pizzas on our permanent menu created by outside sources."

Capitalizing on a technique Parent learned while working on Wall Street, Extreme Pizza continues to "cold call" investment banks and corporations in the city to set up accounts. "There are at least 100 pizza companies in San Francisco and very few others have tapped that market as well as we have."

Extreme Pizza has an open organization, Parent says, and he is always available to help. "It's a hands-on, leadership-by-example organization that helps us train and promote from within," he says. "There is no job too demeaning or over anyone's head."

Extreme Pizza has a dedicated team of support personnel and trainers, he says. "Training is an ongoing, never-ending process we take very seriously," he says. "Really the support and dedication of the entire Extreme team all the way through the ranks separates us from most other pizza companies. Extreme Pizza has been recognized by the *Inc.* 500 three times as one of the leading growth companies in America, which is certainly a testament to our entire team." ■