

L.A.'s fast-casual pizza shops: A look at 7 margherita pizzas



Six ways of looking at a margherita pizza. (Cathy Chaplin)

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If there's an empty storefront in your neighborhood strip mall, chances are that a fast-casual pizza joint will be occupying it shortly — that is, if one hasn't already set up shop. In recent months, a parade of customizable pizza establishments has marched across the Southland, offering an assembly line of meats, cheeses, vegetables and herbs for pizza-goers to mix and match according to their individual palates.

Southern California-based concepts — including Blaze, Pieology, 800 Degrees and PizzaRev — are going head-to-head with out-of-state contenders like Live Basil and MOD Pizza for market share and diners' dollars. With so many brands entering the market, seemingly overnight, it can be nearly impossible to distinguish one build-your-own pizza place from the next.

Examining the major players by assessing their basic margherita pizzas reveals the essential differences between them. Comprised of just tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella, and basil, set on a thin and blistered crust, this Neapolitan classic requires pristine ingredients, sound techniques, and a blazing hot oven. When it comes to

pizza, it's often the simplest ones that reveal the most about an establishment. Here's a look at seven local pizza joints.

The pie-oneer: MOD Pizza

Founders Ally and Scott Svenson entered the DIY pie market back in 2008 in their hometown of Seattle. MOD, which stands for Made On Demand, has grown to 31 locations since then, with one Los Angeles-area outlet operating in North Hollywood and another on the way in Brentwood.

MOD's Margherita (\$7.87), which is baked in a natural gas oven made by Glendale-based Earth Stone, clocked in with one of the slower cook times at 4 minutes, 40 seconds. The pizza's crust, stamped cracker-thin using a heavy-duty dough press, had underside charring and held up to the toppings (conventionally grown tomatoes, basil and Cedar Valley Farms shredded mozzarella) without collapsing in the center. *5300 Lankershim Blvd., Los Angeles, (818) 255-7425, and other locations, modpizza.com.*

The pedigreed pie: 800 Degrees

Of all the fast-casual pizza parlors around town, 800 Degrees adheres most faithfully to Neapolitan pizza-making traditions. Baked in just a minute and a half in a custom Mario Acunto wood-burning oven, the margherita (\$6.85) is sauced with Italian tomatoes and topped with De Stefano fresh mozzarella, Italian Parmigiano-Reggiano, Kenter Farms basil, and California olive oil. The hand-tossed crusts are made with Caputo 00 flour and boast sunken centers, charred edges, and an unbeatable chew, just as the Italians intended, according to chef and co-founder Anthony Carron.

With eight locations operating in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and international expansion in the works, 800 Degrees isn't striving to be the "Chipotle of Pizza," just purveyors of some of the most authentic pies around. *10889 Lindbrook Drive, Los Angeles, (310) 443-1911, and other locations, 800degreespizza.com.*

The prolific pizzaiolo: Blaze Pizza

Blaze's winning combination of pizza craftsmanship and expansion know-how has made it the fast-casual chain to watch. Founders Elise and Rick Wetzels of Wetzels Pretzels, along with chef Bradford Kent of Olio Pizzeria, have grown Blaze to 52 locations in a little over two years. In 2015, the Pasadena-based business is on pace to open an average of one new store every five days.

While Blaze doesn't offer a classic margherita on its menu, one can be created for \$7.65. The dough, made from California wheat milled in Los Angeles, is fermented for 24 hours before being stamped into a perfectly round canvas using a dough press. The Margherita begins with sauce made from Modesto-grown tomatoes layered with Iowa fresh *fior di latte* mozzarella, California olive oil, and locally sourced basil (when possible). Then it's "fast-fire'd" in just under 3 minutes in a Wood Stone brand natural gas oven. *667 E Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, (626) 440-7358, and other locations, blazepizza.com.*

The close contender: Pieology

Rancho Santa Margarita-based Pieology is also growing at a rapid rate, with 44 stores in operation and dozens more on the way. The key to Pieology's expansion has been the successful employment of a franchise business model — that, and creating a product that resonates with diners. Carl Chang, brother of tennis star Michael Chang, founded Pieology following a stint at MOD Pizza in Seattle.

The most notable component of Pieology's margherita (\$7.95) is its paper-thin, cracker-like crust, which is formed using an industrial dough press. The toppings — tomato sauce, grated mozzarella, and basil— are fresh, but do not have any particular provenance. All pies are baked in a Wood Stone brand natural gas oven. *516 N State College Blvd., Fullerton, (714) 447-4064, and other locations, pieology.com.*

The rest of the pack: PizzaRev, Pizza Studio, Live Basil

It's a neck-and-neck battle in the race for the remaining market share between Westlake Village-based PizzaRev and Calabasas-based Pizza Studio, with 22 locations and 24 locations, respectively. Denver's Live Basil, with its unique hydroponic basil grown on site, has one outlet at L.A. Live and half a dozen in its home state.

Both PizzaRev and Live Basil employ the industry standard Wood Stone natural gas ovens at all locations, while Pizza Studio uses a Turbochef conveyor belt-style electric oven. Live Basil's margherita (\$8.45) is the most exceptional of the pack with its San Marzano tomato sauce, Wisconsin-sourced fresh mozzarella, and expectedly fragrant basil.

While PizzaRev (\$7.99) and Pizza Studio (\$5.99) both use California-grown tomato sauce, neither pie is packed with oozy puddles of fresh mozzarella — the shredded stuff just doesn't cut it on a margherita. *PizzaRev: 6439 Canoga Ave., Woodland Hills, (818) 347-4990, and other locations, pizzarev.com. Pizza Studio: 3619 W Magnolia Blvd., Burbank, (818) 224-5250, and other locations, pizzastudio.com. Live Basil: 1011 S Figueroa St., Los Angeles, (213) 746-5483, and other locations, livebasilpizza.com.*

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