



How Crushed Red is making waves in the sea of fast casual pizza

Feb. 4, 2015 | by [Nicole Troxell](#)



What makes a fast casual concept successful? Better yet, what makes a fast casual *pizza* concept successful in the emerging tidal wave of pizza competition?

A few simple factors brought together, such as price, environment and quality, can help a fast casual pizza platform keep its head above water, according to Crushed Red founder Chris LaRocca. Crushed Red is a fast casual concept

featuring artisan-crafted salads and pizzas with the option of customizing each from an array of ingredients. Pizzas are baked in a gas-fired oven within 90 seconds. The restaurant also serves soups, appetizers, wine and beer.

Pizza Marketplace spoke with LaRocca on the recent success of Crushed Red and how the pizzeria is making waves in the fast casual community.

PizzaMarketplace.com: What's the story behind Crushed Red?

Chris LaRocca: We wanted to do a fast casual healthful restaurant that was easily duplicable, which is why we developed chopped salads with organic dressings. Our plan from day one was to open three company restaurants to prove the economics on the concept, so we opened in Clayton, then Kirkwood, Missouri. In reality our concept appears complex concept, but it's not.

PizzaMarketplace.com: Crushed Red has developed its own oven. Why did the company choose to go this route instead of buying an oven that was already designed?

Chris LaRocca: At first I thought we should do the gluten-free route. I attended a restaurant show in Chicago and started to get depressed at how bad the gluten-free products were. I didn't want to do a concept around subpar products.

About 20 minutes after realizing we weren't going gluten-free we saw an interesting tiny oven and noticed the speed at which it cooked. We stood there for a good hour and tasted their pizza and decided that would round out the concept.

We contacted the makers of the oven and spent a day in their kitchen making pizza after pizza and it worked very well. Ovens like that were brand new on the market at the time and we were one of the first to have one.

A week before opening the fire marshal said he'd never seen anything like the oven we had and asked for the specs. I had some trouble obtaining them from the company, and I got physically sick because I spent half a million dollars around this concept that needed to be able to open.

I said to myself that when I open, I'm going to build my own oven and control every bit of it. I didn't like the lack of safety features on the other oven, and there was no temperature readout. It was wobbly and unstable. We met with a group that manufactures ovens and made sure we had good safety features and a digital reader. We're now looking at the second series to make it better, quicker and more efficient.

The ovens are intended to be sold to only Crushed Red, but we developed another line of products for convenient stores, and we will sell to other companies as long as they don't compete with us. For example, we sold one to a full service Mexican restaurant.

PizzaMarketplace.com: Why pizza in particular to round out the concept?

Chris LaRocca: Pizza was the third iteration into our concept, but I knew that we needed something that had broad appeal. We specialize in salads, but we wanted pizza because everyone likes it, and it's customizable. Kids and parents can both be happy. Parents can still have salad and wine.

It's also a good time for pizza. When I developed this I was oblivious to all the other pizza concepts going on. About six months later I was reading a trade publication and started to see all the competition. I started thinking, my gosh we're all playing in the same arena, and I just stumbled onto the front end. We fell into it, and we were an early entry.

We never set out to be a pizza concept and we're not; we're a chopped salad concept that plays very well into the pizza category. Other fast casuals situate their core products around pizza, but we're the opposite, a salad concept first and foremost.

PizzaMarketplace.com: What are the most important factors responsible for the success of Crushed Red?

Chris LaRocca: The perceived high quality packaged with an interior setting that is elevated at a surprisingly reasonable price. By having all three it works very well.

When we developed the concept we tried to be where the others are not. I started in fast casual and was brought in by a large company to develop fast casual. They had been in full service, but they were losing some of their stores to competition because they were stuck in the 80s.

So I researched and experienced fast casual 10 years ago – why it works and why it doesn't. The takeaway is the 800-pound gorilla was and still is Panera and Chipotle, but they have trouble with the p.m. dinner date part. Why? The lighting – it's as bright at 8 a.m. as it is at 10 p.m. There's no mood created. The sound, the size of tables and chairs, the comfort level of booths are all important. Most fast casuals do a poor job of it, which is why they have trouble on the dinner side.

The other piece is lack of alcohol being a major part of their concept. It's not merchandized very well, so I thought, if we can polish our finishes and display those and make a statement, people who want a cocktail will be more inclined to visit us.

I took these two components and designed our concept with larger tables, more padding in booths, lighting that gives a glow and is set down in the evening; I chose earth tones, brick and wood to create this edgy Boulder, Colorado feel. It conjures a comfortable, but hip place to be that has a good vibe to it. It's what we set out to create.

We're now working on our music by trying to hand select every song to make sure that we drive every element of our concept, kind of like the way I wanted to own and develop the oven. We want to be in control of everything.

PizzaMarketplace.com: What makes Crushed Red different from its competitors?

Chris LaRocca: I'm a chef driven restaurant guy. I brought in culinary guys to write the recipes and menus. We weren't a couple of hacks; we wanted to make sure we got good layers of flavor. Organic was a no-brainer. I found a line of salad dressings that are all organic and very consistent. We also knew we wanted to duplicate the concept very early on, so we had to minimize the number of moving parts and the culinary expertise involved.

We set it up in a test kitchen and pulled in Mike Marino of Panera to help develop the dough recipe. We spent nine months tweaking it, and when we finally got it where we wanted, we needed to make it idiot proof so that anyone could make it.

We took the dough to a blender that worked for Panera and had them duplicate it and sign a nondisclosure. No one else knows the recipe; it's our most guarded secret. It comes in our back door in a 25-pound bag, and we mix it, ball it and it's ready to go.

PizzaMarketplace.com: How much of the ingredients in your food is organic?

Chris LaRocca: We don't buy organic produce because our price points don't allow it. We make organic cheese, tomato sauce and offer food that is good for you. Crushed Red serves whole grain pizzas with organic ingredients and there's no plastic-ware. It also tries to run a sustainable restaurant. We minimize waste involved, and try to save the planet one kitchen at a time.

PizzaMarketplace.com: Why did you approach the concept from a healthful standpoint?

Chris LaRocca: First off, it's the right thing to do. We did a pretty good job of forecasting where the nation is going as they dine. We could see dining trends very easily in all the restaurants we ate in, and we knew people wanted flavor. But people will give up some flavor to get healthy results. We wanted to deliver healthful options without giving up flavor, which is why we took the organic route. Ultimately, we're giving customers what they want.

Topics: **Franchising & Growth** , **Health & Nutrition** , **Sustainability**