



JOHN PUCKETT WEIGHS IN ON PASSION, PIZZA and PUNCH



THERE'S A NEW EATERY IN TOWN.

On any day of the week, a line forms inside Wayzata's Punch Pizza as customers patiently wait to place their orders. It's easy to see that Lake Minnetonka area residents are falling in love with these unique pies served straight from a wood-burning oven.

At Punch, pizzas are tossed, topped and fired before the customer's eyes following strict traditions. Punch serves Neapolitan-style pizza, which for many first-time customers can be disorienting. Unlike many American pizza brands that boast cheese hidden within folds of crust and abundant meat, Punch specializes in pizza based on recipes straight from Naples, Italy, which means the dough is thin and the topping are sparse.

Yet the taste has been certified by the *Vera Pizza Napoletana*, an Italian organization responsible for regulating the techniques used in making Neapolitan pizza. More often than not, the taste also wins over skeptics.

By KELLY WESTHOFF

in '92 and sold it in 2001," Puckett says, explaining that Seattle-based Starbucks did try to buy the company early on.

"The only way Caribou was going to survive was by growing really hard," Puckett says. The company burst into a flurry of activity and expansion, opening locations as far away as Atlanta. The tactic worked, at least close to home. "Minnesota is the only market in the world, in the world," he

move was to open a spot in Eden Prairie. "Our hours were cute in Highland Park," Puckett says, "but in Eden Prairie people got really angry because we weren't open all the time. It really taught us that there is a demand for service seven days a week from early till late. Some people eat lunch at three o'clock and others eat dinner at four. People are on the go and they want to eat."

Punch listened, the hours changed, and the company continued to grow. Now, all five locations — Highland Park, Eden Prairie, Lake Calhoun, Northeast Minneapolis and Wayzata — are open for lunch every day of the week at 11 a.m. The doors don't close until 10 p.m.

While Punch acquiesced on its hours, it refuses to change its culture.

"Customers have really shown us that they like ordering at the counter, not having to pay a tip, not having to wait for their bill or their change. They can hang out at their table as long as they want and they can leave whenever they want," Puckett says.

"We don't serve pasta and some people say, 'What? How can you be an Italian restaurant and not serve pasta?' But that's not what we're about, Puckett says. "Here you can get authentic Neapolitan pizza, a salad and a bottle of wine for 40 or 50 bucks. You just can't do a dinner like that for this price anymore."

Punch is also determined to retain its dedication to high-quality food. "We buy all our spices from Penzey's. Sea salt is insanely expensive," Puckett explains.

"We import our *bufala* mozzarella from Italy and we get our sausage from this little guy in Wisconsin who makes whole-pig sausage."

He continues, "We have over 40 food vendors and we're willing to spend more money for the best quality ingredients. Our goal is to make the best authentic Neapolitan pizza in the world, and it just so happens we can't do that if we use processed cheese. We're providing fresh, quality fast food. This type of pizza cooks faster than fast-food pizza. We're working with a wood-burning oven that's a thousand degrees. The pizza cooks in 90 seconds."

In a quick survey of Punch customers, a few might say it's the fired crust that keeps them coming back. Others might say it's the smooth *mozzarella di bufala* that pulls them in. Still others might say it's the sweet, thin tomato sauce that seals the deal. Puckett, however, knows the real secret behind Punch's success.

"The pizza is made with such passion," he says. "It's the passion of the people who are behind it."

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John Puckett, co-owner of Punch, knows this type of pizza isn't for everyone. "We do get customers asking us to put chicken, pineapple or Canadian bacon on our pizzas," he admits. However, customers shouldn't look for a Hawaiian, Southwestern or taco pizza on the menu anytime soon. None of those pies would meet with his business partner's approval, Puckett says.

Punch is run by two men named John. John Puckett bought into Punch, but the company was started by John Serrano, who spent part of his childhood in Italy, which is where he encountered Neapolitan-style pizza. Back in the United States, Serrano opened the first Punch location in the Highland Park neighborhood of St. Paul. Even though the company has since expanded to five locations, including the new Wayzata store, Serrano maintains control of the menu.

"My partner is really the genius behind the pizza," Puckett says. "I just try not to screw up what he comes up with." Instead, Puckett handles the "front of the house," explaining he enjoys customer service. Puckett also works with the company's financial systems.

If his past professional success is any indication of his future business savvy, Punch Pizza has much to gain from Puckett's buy-in. Puckett and his wife Kimberly, who live in Orono, are the couple that started Caribou Coffee.

Even if they couldn't pick Puckett out in a crowd, most Twin Cities residents are familiar with the story behind Caribou's founding. While the company has since been sold, framed pictures of the Pucketts sitting atop a snow-covered mountain still grace many a Caribou wall. It was during a vacation to Alaska that the couple decided they wanted out of the corporate world, and thus opened a coffee shop.

Yet their coffee shop soon morphed into its own corporation. "We started Caribou

emphasizes, "where Starbucks doesn't dominate the coffee scene."

In the end, however, the world of coffee proved stressful and the Pucketts got out. Yet their entrepreneurial spirit still thrived. After selling Caribou, the Pucketts bought half ownership in Punch.

"My wife and I heard about Punch from a friend," Puckett recalls, remembering back to his first encounter with Neapolitan pizza at the original Highland Park location. "Our first time there, we didn't get it. Kim and I looked at each other. The pizza was good, but it wasn't that good," he remembers. "It wasn't until our second time there that we fell in love with it. Soon we were driving in from Wayzata two or three times a month just for the pizza."

Puckett laughs. "When my wife was in the hospital having our daughter, she sent me out to get Punch Pizza for her and staff at Abbott. She did it again for our second daughter."

Now that the couple has children to think about, Puckett admits one of the reasons they were drawn to doing business with Punch was its hours. The time commitment, compared to the 24/7 world of coffee, was smaller.

"One of the reasons I really loved Punch," Puckett says, "was that it was only open for dinner and only five days a week. I was really intrigued by that."

Yet that isn't the case anymore. Once Puckett came onboard, Punch started to consider expansion. The company's first

