

"Better Pizza" Movement is Just a Crust Away.

6/25/2010 /Pizza Marketplace

Technomic's recent Trends and Directions conference at Chicagoland's Donald B. Stephens Convention Center featured renowned foodservice analyst Nancy Kruse on menu trends. But Kruse offered more than new toppings suggestions for the pizza industry. To her, premium crusts offer the glimmer of a pizza renaissance.

It's about time: Unlike some sub-segments, pizza growth has been largely flat or negative. On the other hand, last year's "better burger" trend, exemplified by concepts such as Five Guys, The Counter and Fuddrucker's, has helped drive burger growth: In fact, the fast casual hamburger sub-segment charted 16.7 percent one-year growth in 2009, according to Technomic.

Pizza has been helped by no such wildfire trends or innovations. In fact, pizza concepts were nowhere to be found on top-segments-or-brands-for-growth lists at this conference. Technomic predicts that the pizza segment of limited-service restaurants will have contracted -0.5 percent from 2009 to 2010. Perhaps that's because that industry's answer to limited-service overachievers like Panera, Five Guys and Chipotle has largely been \$10 pizza deals.

But Kruse predicts another way. Citing a multitude of chains with specialized, even health-friendly artisan crusts, she welcomes the "premium crust movement." From her examples – including multigrain crust from Happy Joe's Pizza & Ice Cream Parlor, gluten-free crust from Mellow Mushroom, mozzarella-stuffed crust from Godfather's Pizza and **"artisan" offerings from Mazzio's** – the trends seems indeed to be "better" crust, possible a multitude of ways.

But will it work? Market penetration could help consumers identify the differentiated movement, as they have for "better burgers." That could be eminent: Naked Pizza has already staked its claim to "ancestral grain," and the New Orleans-based concept is supposed to grow to hundreds of units in the next few years. The all-natural Neapolitan pizza movement has entered the mainstream with the growth of brands like Minneapolis-based Punch Pizza. If and when these brands grow like the Five Guys and Fuddrucker's before them, pizza can indeed expect to see the artisan-crust edge of mainstream pizza bring up the rear.