

5 Questions with Greg Lippert

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Greg Lippert is president and CEO of Mazzio's, the Tulsa-based a pizza chain with more than 170 locations in 10 states. Lippert has worked with the company since 1984. He helped launch the Zio's Italian Kitchen brand and most recently Oliveto Italian Bistro.

1. One of Mazzio's newest strategies is putting stores in smaller towns and shopping centers instead of pad restaurant sites. How does this help Mazzio's?

The cost on entry and lease requirements can be favorable in high traffic shopping centers versus building a free-standing location. However, you do miss that instant identification of a high profile free-standing site that we built successfully for years, but an end cap in a shopping center where the landlord allows you to properly identify the location with appropriate branding elements can be as good as a free-standing site.

Parking is also key. Most people do not want to walk too far, and your site must have enough parking spaces for customers as well as for your employees to park nearby. With the added importance of carryout, many customers prefer to call ahead and carry out their meals.

2. How often do you bring home a pizza, and what is your preferred pie?

I eat Mazzio's pizza probably three to four times per week. Many times I visit our restaurants during lunch hours and then I carry out pizza at least once a week, sometimes more. If we are doing a new promotion, my pizza-eating goes up significantly.

My favorite Mazzio's pizza at the moment is our deli pizza on thin crust. It has lots of flavor and I love the ingredients on this pizza. I just keep eating it. I'll say, "OK, just one more slice," and I end up eating at least four slices.

3. There are Oliveto Italian Bistro locations in Tulsa and Tyler, Texas, right now. When and where will the next location open?

We are evaluating a site in western Oklahoma, and a franchisee candidate is interested in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. We are early in the marketing of this concept.

Oliveto has a menu that is rather dynamic with seasonal changes and specials to allow customers to try different appetizers and entrees, and that requires culinary development, sourcing and training. The concept also has a good range of high quality wines that were sourced to be a good complement to our food but also to be reasonably priced by the glass and bottle.

4. Mazzio's is constantly experimenting with new products. What's the worst idea or biggest flop you've ever seen at Mazzio's for a specialty pizza?

We have always had great pizzas that we were proud to serve, but if we have been guilty of anything it is being ahead of the market. We try many different types of ingredients to keep our customers' experience fresh and interesting.

Back in the late 1980s, we introduced a new line of specialty pizzas - seafood pizza, California bistro pizza, barbecue pizza, cheeseburger pizza. They all tasted great, but the market was not ready for them yet.

The most popular topping in 1961 when Mr. Selby opened his first location on 11th Street was pepperoni, and it is still today.

5. Competition and changing tastes are constantly changing the restaurant industry. Where are trends pushing companies like Mazzio's?

One of our points of difference that we have had for years is that we make our pizza sauce fresh each day at every location and use a special blend of spices that is a bit spicier and less sweet than other pizza places.

Today's customers are looking for more full-flavored products and fresh-made pizza crust. We never made the decision to go to frozen dough and pre-made sauce like many of the other pizza places do today. It just does not taste as good. But making our pizzas in this manner requires more effort by each location, but we think the end product is better.

There are other challenges, too. One, there are always going to be new restaurants that open. With the popularity of the Food Channel and other programming related to ingredients and options, customers are becoming more accustomed to specialty foods. Pizza and Italian cuisine continues to be one of the most popular categories of all choices.

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