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Life by the slice

by: KIM BROWN World Scene Writer

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Ken Selby's half-century career in pizza began with a car ride to Chicago in 1956.

Then a college student, Selby was about to find his lifelong career - as founder of what would become Ken's Pizza and eventually Mazzio's Italian Eatery - but he'd never even heard of this strange-sounding food.

One of his pals said in the car, "I can't wait to get up to Chicago and eat some pizza," Selby recalled this week, while at his south Tulsa restaurant, Oliveto Italian Bistro. "I was 20 years old, and I had never heard the word, 'pizza.'"

He tried his first slice soon after at a drug store in south Chicago.

"It was the best food I'd ever tasted," he said. "I was used to chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes. I really fell in love with pizza."

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of his first Tulsa restaurant, Selby and Mazzio's are offering his original Ken's Pizza recipe. The promotion launched about four weeks ago, and its immediate popularity surprises Selby a little.

"I never thought it would be such a phenomenon," he said, laughing. "Not very many businesses survive 50 years, so we're happy that we're still here."

Selby remembers developing what would become his signature pie: 16 inches of thin crust with a spicy sauce.

And it certainly didn't happen overnight. He opened his first Tulsa restaurant, called the Pizza Parlor, in 1961, while also working as a high-school chemistry teacher.

Pizza man by night

"I operated it for four years and taught school in the daytime," he said. "From 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., I was in school, and from 4 to midnight I made pizza. I rolled the pizza dough out with a rolling pin, and I made the dough in a No. 2 galvanized wash tub. I spent a lot of nights by myself changing the recipe until I finally got it standardized. It was a spicy, good-tasting product."

When Selby was ready to open his second restaurant near 15th Street and Sheridan Road, he thought the name Pizza Parlor "was generic," so he called it Ken's Pizza.

By the late 1970s, Selby had cornered the market on casual-dining restaurants and needed a new name.

"I thought I had picked a name that wasn't as good as it could be," he said. "There were Ken's muffler shops, so I thought it was time to change the name. And I came up with the name Mazzio's."

Eventually, most Ken's Pizza eateries gave way to updated Mazzio's restaurants, but a few still exist. Several franchisees decided to keep the Ken's Pizza name and still operate stores in Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas.

Mazzio's CEO Greg Lippert said the timing was just right to celebrate the company's 50th anniversary.

"It's ironic that today's customers are again looking for bold and flavorful pizza. We felt Ken's original recipe was right on target to meet this current demand," he wrote in an e-mail. "We have enjoyed receiving many personal letters and e-mails from past customers and employees that are so excited to be able to buy this pizza again. The letters talked about their positive experiences working at Ken's, for many their first real job in high school, meeting their future spouses, lifelong friends they made and celebrating family events."

And although Ken's Pizza was intended as a special promotion for 2011, it could wind up being a permanent addition.

"How long will we keep it on the Mazzio's menu? As long as there is demand for Ken's, we'll keep it at Mazzio's," Lippert said.

Selby, who still works half days at his company, has been receiving requests for the original Ken's pizza for years.

So how many of the pizzas have they sold since the rollout?

"Tons," Selby said. "We have customers who have been longing for the Ken's recipe for years."

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Associated Images:



This photo was taken by Ken Selby's mother on his first day at his first restaurant, the Pizza Parlor near the University of Tulsa, in 1961.



Ken Selby works at one of his early Tulsa-area pizza restaurants, a forerunner of Mazzio's.

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