

# The Miami Herald

August 22, 2011

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### ANTHONY'S FIRES UP

South Florida favorite Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza has tripled its locations, aggressively expanding to a big slice of the Northeast.



# Firing up expansion

Homegrown **Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza** has tripled its locations, aggressively moving into the Northeast.

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While the rest of the country is tightening its belt, Anthony Bruno is piling on the cheese.

In the last three years, the owner of Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza has expanded his pizzerias from eight in South Florida to a big slice of the Northeast that includes New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Anthony's now totals 25. And he's not stopping: Bruno plans on continuing to grow in Florida and the Northeast and this year successfully squashed a competing pizzeria in Manalapan that copied his signature dishes.

Asked about his success, Bruno, who opened his first restaurant on Federal Highway in Fort Lauderdale in 2002, quipped, "We don't sleep. That's the first thing."

Aside from sleepless nights, Bruno concedes his quick growth comes largely from careful planning that included thorough training of his staff, strategically locating new pizzerias and a solid investment strategy. It didn't hurt that high-end pizzerias like his gained footing, growing just in time to meet a new consumer appetite for better pizza that fit nicely with skinnier wallets.

"Typically during bad economic times the pizza segment fares really well due to the price point and

it's kind of a communal food in that a large pizza can feed a family," said Jeremy White, editor-in-chief of *Pizza Today*.

But even pizza suffered in this last recession. The trade publication estimated that in the last three years, the number of pizzerias nationally dropped by 10,000.

"The sad fact is the overwhelming majority of restaurants fail in the first two years," White said. "In a typical year, about 550 new pizzerias open and about 425 close."

So for Anthony's to survive and grow, White noted, "they've beaten the odds."

Bruno's restaurant experience dates back to 1982 when he and his father opened Anthony's Runway 84 near the airport in Fort Lauderdale. After two decades, Bruno decided to leap into the pizza business and moved quickly. But carefully.

At his first restaurant, Bruno stuck with pizzas baked in an 800-degree coal-burning oven. He eventually added chicken wings, ribs and eggplant, but kept it basic.

"If you have too many items, you lose your focus on things and things usually become mediocre and we don't want to be that kind of restaurant," he said.

Bruno also attracted Dan Marino as an investor, hitting a sweet spot that connected his market to one of

its most beloved heroes (if you've ever listened to local sports radio, you're already familiar with Anthony's).

And when he expanded, he moved slowly at first.

"We wanted to stay in our backyard in the beginning. I've been in South Florida for 30 years, so myself and my partners, we instinctively knew where to go: Broward County first and then Palm Beach because we were more familiar with them, and then Miami."

Once he had his Florida base and a successful track record, he moved into the competitive Northeast and its finicky, seasoned pizza eaters.

That move required that he not only have a good product, but a well-trained staff and employment system that would allow the rapid expansion. Bruno estimates he employs between 1,200 and 1,400. His compensation packet, he said, "really brings us good people who want to see growth and grow with us."

Revenue has grown from \$19.1 million in 2008 to \$28.6 million in 2009 to \$39.7 million last year.

"We kind of bridge the gap between the parents wanting something good and the kids still wanting pizza," he said. "We have a great wine list and beer list and the kids, at the end of the day, they're still eating pizza."

Bruno also created invest-



PHOTOS BY WALTER MICHOT/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**WELL DONE:** Anthony Bruno, founder of Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza, makes pizzas at the chain's Fort Lauderdale location on U.S. 1, also pictured below.



tor groups, offering each the right to open four to five stores with Bruno having the right of first refusal

His timing couldn't have been better. Just as Anthony's grew, South Florida underwent a "mini pizza renaissance," White said.

Among the best pizzerias that have opened in South Florida, White named: Andiamo's in an old gas station in the Design District; Sosta Pizzeria and Spris on Lincoln Road and in Coral Ga-

bles; Primanti Brothers, which has three locations in Fort Lauderdale; and the Pizza Grill in West Palm Beach.

"None of these places existed 10 years ago," White said. "They're part of that new pizza explosion."

As for Anthony's, he's scouting locations in Coral Gables but predicts his biggest growth will be in the Northeast, no matter the economy.

"I think a restaurant like

## Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza

- **Number of restaurants:** 25, in Florida, Delaware, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania.
- **Founder and CEO:** Anthony Bruno
- **Director of Operations:** Chuck Locke
- **Equity partners:** Nicholas Castaldo, Michelangelo Mozzicato, Patrick Marzano, Deborah Mozzicato, Samuel Weiss and Dan Marino.
- **2010 gross revenue:** \$39.7 million.
- **Employees:** 1,200-1,400.
- **Honors:** Zagat ranked Anthony's one of its top restaurants in 2010 for Miami/South Florida.
- **Website:** www.anthonyscoal-firedpizza.com

this will always be around. It will do well in a good economy and when the economy tapers off, we'll still be here."