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SPECIALTY PIE: Deborah Mozzicato, one of the owners of Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza, at the South Federal Highway and 23rd Street restaurant in Fort Lauderdale. Staff photo/Robert Duyos

THEY'RE ALL FIRED UP

Pizzeria owners put new spin on hot product

BY JACLYN GIOVIS
STAFF WRITER

It took the owners of **Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza** awhile to light the coal fires at their first restaurant in Fort Lauderdale — two weeks to be exact. Their custom-built oven didn't come with directions and was built to burn at 800 degrees, a temperature that cooks a crispy, well-done pizza in just four minutes.

Since that day in 2002, Fort Lauderdale restaurateur Anthony Bruno and his management team — which includes football legend and local entrepreneur Dan Marino and Nicholas Castaldo, former president of **Pollo Tropical** — have stirred the coal fires just enough to create an upscale South Florida pizzeria with locations in Aventura, Pompano Beach and Weston.

Now the restaurant group is heating up its plans for growth and expansion. Last month, Anthony's opened a location in Plantation, and this year it will roll out restaurants in Palm Beach Gardens, Delray Beach, Boca Raton and Coral Springs.

The \$35 billion U.S. pizza market is a competitive one in which major chains and mom-and-pop restaurants fight for consumer



TEAM: CEO Anthony Bruno, center, with Vice President Michelangelo Mozzicato, right, and President Nick Castaldo. Photo/Josh Ritchie

dollars. Increasingly, local owners that focus on serving affluent customers who want specialty pizzas are putting pressure on the big chains, experts say.

But for newcomers like Bruno and his partners, who envision creating a booming regional brand, the biggest challenge to success often is finding a niche without compromising what sets them apart from the crowd. The list of contenders includes established global brands like **Pizza Hut** and delivery chains like **Domino's**, as well as upscale restaurants like **California Pizza Kitchen** and

Wolfgang Puck.

"The pizza market is huge, and it's growing," said Richard Lackey, a South Florida restaurant developer and national restaurant industry expert. "The big players are making substantial adjustments because they're being attacked by niche operators who are doing things different, such as organic pizza and coal-fired pizza."

Bruno, a New Yorker with Italian roots, got his entrepreneurial start in the food service business with Anthony's Runway 84 in Fort

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Pizza business heats up

PIZZA

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Lauderdale. Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza was a concept born of frustration, he said.

"I was down here in South Florida a long time, and I didn't have any pizza that I liked," Bruno said.

Offering a simple menu of premium-priced pizza, salads and chicken wings has been a successful economic recipe for Anthony's, said President Nicholas Castaldo. Each restaurant reaps average annual sales of about \$2 million, with returns that are double those of many pizza competitors, he said.

In addition, Anthony's has seized the opportunity to grow in South Florida by buying a few shuttered Pizza Hut parlors, Castaldo said.

Castaldo and Bruno say service at Anthony's comes with a personal touch that is often lacking at major pizza chains.

"There's a lot of kissing around here," said Bruno, as he got up to hug and kiss some familiar customers in the Fort Lauderdale restaurant on a recent afternoon.

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STOKING THE APPETITE: John Liguori, managing partner for Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza in Weston, pulls a freshly made pizza from the coal-burning oven. Photo/Rhonda Vanover

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Richard Lackey
South Florida restaurant developer
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ANTHONY'S COAL FIRED PIZZA

Headquarters: 17901 Biscayne Blvd., Aventura

Locations: Aventura, Fort Lauderdale, Pompano Beach, Weston, Plantation

Planned locations: Palm Beach Gardens, Delray Beach, Boca Raton, Coral Springs

Employees: About 200

Average annual sales per restaurant: About \$2 million