

# gluten-free pizza prism

*Many considerations go into  
the success of the niche pie.* / BY JODY SHEE

**G**one are the days when restaurants merely gave gluten-free designation to menu items that didn't contain the elastic substance to begin with. Also gone are the days when celiac disease was the main reason to add gluten-free items to the menu.

Pizza is one of the biggest categories to watch, considering the strides made to bring viable options to the table. It's been an uphill climb for operators, given gluten-free pizza's short history on U.S. menus, the ingredient-replacement learning curve and cross-contamination concerns.

## bare beginnings

Italy had its gluten-free pizza renaissance about 10 years ahead of the U.S., says San Francisco-based Tony Gemignani, author, and owner of 12 restaurants and the International School of Pizza. He also is an 11-time World Pizza Champion. He attends the World Pizza Championship in Italy each year and notes that Italy first had a gluten-free pizza competition in about 2000. There was not a gluten-free category in U.S. pizza competitions until about 2010.

He sees great hope for the U.S. market with regards to gluten-free, which has catapulted in the past two years, thanks, in part, to the great flour blends available from Italy, he says, adding, "In the U.S., when we get into a renaissance, we really get into it and make it commercial." Much of the activity starts at the competition level among independent operators, then, chains get on board.

As an early adopter, fast-casual Pizza Fusion, Boca Raton, Florida, opened the first of 20 units with gluten-free options in 2006. The category fit with the chain's business model and its mission statement to uphold the integrity of its food and care for the health of its customers and the environment.

"We found a growing customer segment with celiac disease, and we saw it as an opportunity," says Vaughan Dugan, CEO/co-founder. However, interest in gluten-free options has morphed from avoiding gluten allergic reactions to a diet trend of simply trying to limit gluten intake. In

### OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

1) Gluten-free margherita pizza from SPIN! Neapolitan Pizza. 2) The gluten-free pizzas available from Pieology Pizzeria have a slightly sweeter flavor profile than pizzas with a traditional crust, yet are still crispy and have slightly less chew. 3) Since Pieology Pizzeria opened in 2011, its gluten-free crusts have gone through several refining tweaks. 4) Gluten-free veggie pizza with sliced tomatoes, artichokes and arugula from PieQ. 5) Gluten-free meat-lovers pizza with peppers from PieQ.



### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GLUTEN-FREE

Effective August 2014, the Food and Drug Administration began requiring that FDA-regulated food labeled gluten-free must comply with the agency's definition and requirements. The National Restaurant Association prepared an FAQ document to break down what that means.

Check out the document at [www.restaurant.org/News-Research/News/FAQs-on-Gluten-Free-Labeling](http://www.restaurant.org/News-Research/News/FAQs-on-Gluten-Free-Labeling) to find answers to these questions and more:

- Are restaurants required to comply with the FDA's new rule on gluten-free labeling?
- What is the FDA's regulatory definition of gluten-free?
- Can an item be labeled gluten-free if it is made with a small amount of a gluten-containing ingredient resulting in a finished product that contains less than 20 ppm of gluten?
- What does 20 ppm of gluten look like?
- Can a restaurant that cooks with gluten-containing ingredients—and perhaps even has airborne flour—still achieve the 20 ppm benchmark for specific menu items?
- How do I ensure that gluten levels are within the FDA's 20 ppm threshold?
- Are other claims about gluten levels—such as “low gluten” or “very low gluten”—allowed?
- Are statements like “made with no gluten-containing ingredients” or “not made with gluten-containing ingredients” permitted without making a specific gluten-free claim?
- Are there specific recordkeeping requirements for foods to be labeled gluten-free?

the beginning, about 3% of Pizza Fusion's sales came from gluten-free pizza. Now, the category makes up 15%-17% of sales.

### maintaining integrity

Knowing what he does about the opportunities to inadvertently introduce cross-contaminates, Dugan recoils at the idea that some operators might add a gluten-free pizza option as an afterthought simply to stay competitive.

The FDA has set a gluten limit of less than 20 parts per million for something to be labeled gluten-free. That's a tough regulation for restaurateurs to adhere to, says Bruno DiFabio, a consultant and the owner of 11 pizzerias nationally, based in Ridgefield, Connecticut. He is a 13-time medalist at the World Pizza Games/Pizza World Championships. He adds that to assure a gluten-free product and environment, the product should be produced in a dedicated lab in which workers enter the facility in street clothes and change into a uniform at work, for starters. “Not many places are doing that,” he says. He estimates that less than 5% of operators who say they offer gluten-free product meet the standard. “The government has yet to crack down, but the law was passed.”

DiFabio believes that about the best a restaurant can do is purchase frozen gluten-free dough made in a lab and sold through wholesalers. “But the restaurant is opening the package in an environment that mixes dough where there's no way they would come close to meeting the limit,” he says. The dough that is available he believes is only of fair quality.

For its part, Pizza Fusion contracts with a single bakery to make the pie shells in a gluten-free facility, individually wrap them and send them to the distributor for delivery to each restaurant. Each unit is outfitted with a separate make-table and uses separate sauce, ladles and baking pans, for example.

Still, Dugan acknowledges, “Those who get severely sick shouldn't be hanging out in a pizza place. It's the last place you want to be. We have to have the disclaimer that we are not a 100% gluten-free or wheat-free facility.”

### health matters

Richard Lozoff, founding partner/co-owner of Kansas City, Missouri-based SPIN! Neapolitan Pizza, is also a practicing gastroenterologist who specializes in celiac sensitivity. He admits that when he opened SPIN! in 2005, gluten-free pizza was not on his mind. However, about the time demand began to develop five or six years ago, a gluten-free bakery opened in Kansas City. He contracted with it to make pizza crusts for about 10 months, until supply could no longer meet demand. Then he began sourcing frozen pizza crusts from a company that operates nationally and sells through his distributor.

When guests order a gluten-free pizza at SPIN!, staff members change their gloves, use separate utensils and bake the pizza on a separate baking sheet. Some of the larger stores have a separate oven just for gluten-free. “But we do have a disclosure that we can't guarantee 100% gluten-free because of ambient flour in the air,” Lozoff says.

The sales performance of gluten-free pizza at SPIN! has increased to approximately 10% of sales over the past year or two. While the initial gluten-free-everything craze has subsided a bit, Lozoff notes that the gastrointestinal world increasingly is focusing on non-celiac gluten sensitivity or intolerance. “A lot of studies show an association between gluten and irritable bowel syndrome,” Lozoff says. “Other specialists recommend a gluten-free diet for autoimmune inflammatory conditions like rheumatoid arthritis and also for fibromyalgia.”

A more-educated customer base is driving the need for gluten-free pizza, says Carl Chang, founder/CEO of Pieology Pizzeria, Rancho Santa Margarita, California, with nearly 60 units. The chain opened in 2011 offering gluten-free pizza. “From my background, athletes are trying to avoid gluten for physical performance. Gluten impacts their athletic abilities, energy levels and glycemic levels,” Chang says. “Being ignorant of that is missing the boat. It's a trend.”



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“I wanted something that tasted fantastic. I didn’t just want to put a product out there that satisfied a category. That’s not acceptable.”

Carl Chang, founder/CEO,  
Pieology Pizzeria, Rancho Santa  
Margarita, California

As might be expected with the R&D-inferring Pieology name, the chain’s dough is ever-evolving, with several gluten-free dough iterations over time. “If you’re not continually innovating and pushing the envelope, you’re not staying relevant,” Chang says.

His gluten-free crust has a slightly sweeter flavor profile than traditional crust, is still crispy and has slightly less chew. “I wanted something that tasted fantastic. I didn’t just want to put a product out there that satisfied a category. That’s not acceptable,” he says.

### winning crust ingredients

The list of appropriate gluten-free crust ingredients is long, varied and ever-evolving. Flours derived from rice, tapioca, coconut, garbanzo beans and fava beans have become popular. Without gluten, another starch, such as potato starch, is necessary to help bind, says Gemignani.

He learned through competing against Italians not to use eggs, because the crust turns yellow. Rather, egg whites help fluff up the dough. Other appropriate ingredients are agave nectar, honey and such herbs as rosemary or thyme. However, purchasing all the ingredients could turn it into a \$60 pizza, when it might be just as well to purchase a blend to which you simply add water and salt.

Pizza Fusion’s dough is made with filtered water, organic cane sugar, organic olive oil, salt, yeast, rice flour, brown rice flour, tapioca starch, potato starch, potato flour, xanthan gum and pectin (lemon derivative), says Dugan. He worked with Naomi Poe, founder of Better Batter Gluten Free Flour, Altoona, Pennsylvania, to develop the crust. “Our pizza is almost indistinguishable from regular pizza, which is a huge point of differentiation for us,” he says.

### junk food overthrow

An emerging pizza concept, PieQ, Detroit, is set to be a “pizza disrupter,” says Brian Parker, co-founder/president. He is also partner/co-founder of Moo Cluck Moo, with two locations in Michigan. “What do we hire pizza to do? To feed us. We love it, but everyone who loves it thinks it’s junk food. I looked at that as an opportunity,” he says.

He determined that the best route to better-for-you pizza was through the crust—minus carbs, gluten and sugar, plus protein and fiber. He drew on the master craftsmanship of James Beard award-winning chef/restaurateur/food scientist/innovator Jimmy Schmidt, who also wears the title of “mad scientist.” Off and on for 10 years, Schmidt worked on the technology to deliver a new, healthier crust. Then, within 90 days of building a pizza lab in downtown Detroit, he had perfected the crust. “People are amazed at the flavor profile, dispelling the myth that something that’s good for you doesn’t necessarily taste good,” Parker says.

Though he won’t divulge the crust ingredients, Parker points to the onus he put on Schmidt to develop a high-protein, low-carb and lectin-free crust, which also makes it gluten-free. The result is a pourable batter rather than a dough. “The batter cooks thoroughly, is fluffy, not doughy, with an incredible flavor profile,” he says. “The only way to describe it is ‘artisanal.’”

He notes that in the Italian history of pizza, it once was a super-food. “We’re trying to bring it back as a super-food like it was—highly nutritious.”

With a franchise carry-out/delivery model, the first unit is set to open in North Carolina in early summer. Parker already has agreements with interested parties in at least eight states, and pictures not only 900-1,200-square-foot stores, but the possibility of partnering with grocery stores to set up units.

He hesitates to blazon a “gluten-free” marketing message. “I want to be careful of what we go to market with. Let’s talk about what the pizza does, not what it doesn’t do,” he says. ■



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Tony Gemignani, author, and owner of  
12 restaurants and the International  
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PHOTO CREDITS: Top: Pieology Pizzeria; bottom, Sarah Inloes