



Zeeks Pizza

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http://www.seattledining.com/Current/Zeeks_pizza.htm

Home grown pizza guys

Pizza is a very relaxed food. You don't have to sit up straight when you eat it. Some sloppiness is expected. But making good pizza demands more focus. What kind of person loves to relax over pizza but is structured enough to make really good pizza? Let us introduce you to the Zeeks Pizza guys.

Tom Vial and Doug McClure met after college at Anderson Consulting, becoming computer software engineers. They also became best friends. "We knew we wouldn't stay with Anderson for the long haul," recalls Tom. "We started talking almost immediately about what else we could do."



Photo: left to right, Dan Black, Tom Vial, Doug McClure

On a ski trip to Montana, they saw a long line snaking out of the local Pizza Hut. People were willing to stand in line for pizza in -10° weather. "That's it—we're moving here and opening a pizza place!" Two months later, they quit their jobs, borrowed Tom's parents' RV, parked it in a campground and looked for space. "Mostly we snowboarded," says Doug. "We ran into a deal breaker. In Montana, you don't apply for a liquor license, you buy an existing one. We found a guy who owned two licenses and no restaurants. He wanted \$200,000 each, which was more than ten times what we had to open our whole business."

Back in Seattle, they began looking again. Each time they found the perfect spot, it was taken by some outfit called Starbucks. "We finally found the only guy who would rent to us, Dick Lee. The place was just a few blocks from where we lived. He shook our hands and signed us up," recalls Tom.

All along, they had been working on the perfect pizza. "We were very Anderson-like," says Tom. "We handed out feedback forms to everyone who tried the pizza and then made changes based on the comments." Doug's father bought them a computer and they completed their business plan in a week. As Dan Black, Doug's brother-in-law and president of Zeeks says, "They were working at a PhD level on pizza, eating everyone's pizza, reading cookbooks and making their own."



"We had a lease and didn't even know where we wanted to buy our food," remembers Doug. "John Croce of Pacific Food Importers played a huge role in our success. We walked in to PFI and said 'We want to make the best pizza' and the sales person said to someone 'Get the old man'. He was skeptical but walked us through the warehouse telling us which cheese and sauce to use. They still buy from PFI today.

Photo: the first Zeeks location: North Queen

Anne/Fremont (originally half this size)

"We opened with no employees," says Doug. "We each made pizzas, but they had to be the same." Tom laughs. "We'd try something and then taste it and say 'Don't you think this is better?' and the other guy would say 'No.' 'No, really???' They made thousands of pizzas and critiqued each one. "When we make pizza side-by-side now, you can't tell the difference," says Doug.

Zeeks Pizza Locations

206-285-TOGO (8646)

www.zeekspizza.com

North Queen Anne/Fremont

41 Dravus
Seattle, WA 98109
Opened 1993

Phinney

6000 Phinney Ave N.
Seattle, WA 98103
Opened 1996

Belltown

419 Denny Way
Seattle, WA 98109
Opened 1998

Green Lake

7900 E Greenlake Dr N
Seattle, WA 98103
Opened 2000

Ravenna

2108 NE 65th

Opening day arrived. The first customer came in and bought...a t-shirt. "I didn't even have the register programmed," says Tom. "I think we gave him the shirt." Weekday business was based on their proximity to an office park, SPU and the docks. Weekends were slow. "That's when we started delivery," recalls Tom. "Doug made the first delivery on his skate board. We delivered in a 2-3 block area—anywhere you could go on the skate board. It became very popular."

At the end of their first year, John Hinterberger of The Seattle Times reviewed them. Business doubled overnight. Six months later, they opened their Phinney location. Two years later they opened Belltown. In two more years, they opened Green Lake and Ravenna within a month of each other. "At that point, we had to stop with the hair on fire and figure out how to run the business," says Doug. "We were pretty unsophisticated in terms of running multiple stores," agrees Tom.

In 2005, the first franchised store opened. Naturally, the idea came about during a ski trip with a buddy. "We wanted to grow and had been learning about franchises," says Tom. "Steve was at our opening party in 1993 and loved the product. In June of 2010, he'll open a Zeeks in Bellevue."

Doug had been driving past the perfect building in West Seattle for years. When he saw a "For Lease" sign going up, he stopped and called the number. "The guy says 'I'm still on the ladder!' We really wanted that location," laughs Doug. They opened in May of 2009. The next franchised location opened in June 2009 in Issaquah.

Zeeks success is based on several factors. "We have a loyal following," says Tom. "I also think that over the last few decades, pizza has become America's favorite food. And Seattle appreciates good pizza." Doug adds, "We're a neighborhood pizzeria where families are welcome and people come to relax." In addition, says Dan, "We have the dining rooms, we have the slice line, we do delivery and corporate delivery. Plus we've gotten better at how we do these things."

Each location is different, but the West Seattle location will be the template for future stores. "You can see Zeeks evolution if you look at all the stores," says Doug. Dan adds, "Each site is the ultimate neighborhood pizzeria and we want to keep that. But we want to reflect the different character of each neighborhood."

Zeeks menu has stayed simple over the years: pizza, salad, bread sticks. Beer and wine are available and, at the Issaquah location, a full bar. "We think if people get a good pizza, they don't want anything else. Keep it simple, do it well," says Doug.

Dan was brought in because of his experience helping mid-sized companies expand. "We want to open 20-35 stores over the next 5-7 years," he says. "They'll be a combination of company-owned and franchised locations. We're figuring out where that expansion will happen. Seattle can probably support 5-10 more stores. We want to grow rationally. Our first goal is to do no harm." Tom and Doug will be fully involved in each new opening, including making pizzas. "You don't know how things will flow until it opens and you're improvising. It doesn't feel right if we're not there," says Doug.

Seattle, WA 98105
Opened 2000

Kirkland (franchise)

124 Park Lane
Kirkland, WA 98033
Opened 2005

West Seattle

6459 California Ave SW
Seattle, WA 98136
Opened 2009

Issaquah (franchise)

2525 NE Park Dr
Issaquah, WA 98029
Opened 2009

Bellevue (franchise)

Opening June 2010

Bottom line, Tom and Doug are happy to hand over other duties and get back to being the pizza guys. Zeeks started out being 100% about the pizza and that's what it's still all about today.

Connie Adams/February 2010