



eat drink

White Top (top) and
barbecue chicken pizzas
KAITLYN MCQUIDD FOR REDEYE

DIY pie

A speedy build-your-own pizza
shop opens in Lakeview

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

On a day after a college-worthy bender when your stomach is sloshing like a beer-filled fishbowl, there is only one antidote: pizza. But not just any pizza. You have your usual place. It's some spartan backroom where the dudes behind the counter are impossibly happy (there's a good chance a bong was involved, or maybe just a really good employee training program) even though the oven breathes hellfire and everyone there is hung-over or still hammered from last night. The thing is, the pizza is kinda gloppy and floppy. You like it mostly because it is cheap, quick and oozes with soothing grease. It doesn't have to be that way. What if you could have all these things—happy cooks, value pricing, super-speedy service—and great pizza? At Lakeview's Blaze, a new design-your-own pizza emporium, you might be able to.

The crust: Cheap pizza usually means cheap crust. Though the 11-inch pies at Blaze range from a wallet-pleasing \$5 for basic cheese to \$7.45 for specialty pizzas, the crust is excellent. It's given a 24-hour rise and cooked in a gas-fired open hearth-style oven for 2 to 3 minutes until it comes out blistered and crackling. My only quibble is that one way they save time is that instead of hand-stretching the dough, they use bright orange dough presses (which look like medieval torture devices invented by Mario Batali) to stamp out perfect circles every time. The presses produce a built-up outer lip, but they also stamp out some of the awesome pillowy rise at the edges. "I have worked tirelessly with our dough press manufacturer to create one that does not compromise the lightness and texture of the finished pizza," executive chef Brad Kent said. "Yes, the idea of pressing a crust does seem aggressive on the dough ... [but] if we were to hand toss, we could overwork and also toughen the dough. This is less likely with the press." Gluten-free dough is also available.

The toppings: I know some people consider barbecue chicken pizza (\$7.45) the satanic offspring of California Pizza Kitchen, but I've always loved it. Blaze's version includes the usual chicken, red onion and barbecue sauce, but steps it up with mozzarella and funky, sweet gorgonzola, plus pickled banana peppers that add an acidic zing that cuts through the rich cheese. Speaking of California, you can get artichokes and arugula on the pies at Blaze, and the cheese selection includes shredded and fresh mozzarella,

BELMONT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

Levy Family Partners, founded by Larry Levy, chairman and founder of Levy Restaurants, has plans to develop 14 other Blaze locations in the Chicago area. Two other Blaze restaurants are currently in development at 555 W. Madison St. and 227 E. Ontario St.

ricotta, goat and vegan cheese. Pepperoni, bacon and the usual meaty suspects are joined by crumbled meatballs and salami.

The sauce: In addition to the barbecue sauce, which had a nice hint of smoke and sweetness, there's tangy classic red tomato sauce, spicy red tomato sauce and white cream sauce. I tried the white sauce on Blaze's signature White Top pie (\$7.45), featuring peppery arugula, thick bits of bacon and a nice seasoning of sweet garlic and spicy, floral oregano. Unfortunately, the pungent toppings overpowered the cream and it was tough to tell what it tasted like.

The service: Like the cashiers at Trader Joe's, there's an overeager, almost unnatural cheerfulness in Blaze's staffers, or as they are called, "pizza-smiths." These folks make your pizza freaky fast. You can help them build your pie by selecting ingredients, which are laid out on the counter in front of you, just like at Chipotle. Watching the dough get topped and sent to the oven reminded me of one of those car washes with the windows to watch the brushes, soapers and dryers doing their thing.

Other stuff: I tried the s'more pie (\$2), a graham cracker-chocolate-marshmallow creation that's heated to order in the pizza oven until it transforms in to a gooey, addictive dessert sandwich. Also, Blaze sports the first blood orange lemonade fountain I've ever seen. Most diners opted for the regular lemonade, but I loved the bright, sour punch of the blood orange flavor (\$2.25).

The bottom line: Blaze's quick service, casual vibe and value pricing makes it feel like the sleek commercial version of those college pizza joints where you spent a lot of post-drinking time. Unlike those places, these high-quality pies will be attractive to anyone who likes good pizza.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

@REDEYEATRINK | REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM

PIZZA
REVIEW
Blaze
Pizza
553 W.
Belmont Ave.
773-348-6255