

Why pie?

Pizza hits the spot
for families on the go

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The old bromide that bread is the staff of life may need an update.

Perhaps it's pizza's time.

"For the active family, pizza is the perfect food," said Chris Woodruff, chairman of Lake Michigan College's hospitality and culinary department. "It's easily made quickly. Usually, it can feed a larger family affordably, and people can get what they like on it. It's easy to carry, and it's easy to transport. For all of those reasons, that's why pizza's become such a popular food."

Ask Woodruff to explain how Southwest Michigan can support some 100 pizza places, and he cites several factors – starting with the appeal of pizza itself, which also coincides with an increasingly hectic society.

See **WHY**, page A5

WHY

From page A1

Another factor is a relatively low barrier to entry, depending on the business model the new owner pursues, Woodruff said.

For example, an independent owner-operator can rent a building “and get it for a couple months’ lease,” Woodruff said. “You may be able to find some equipment, or a place that used to be a pizza place. The startup costs can be very minimal, probably \$30,000 to \$40,000.”

Similarly, if you’re buying into a franchise – which also requires an initial investment of \$30,000, and can escalate into the millions – it pays to investigate an up-and-comer like East of Chicago, Woodruff said.

“That company’s looking right now to expand their brand, and want franchisees to help them expand, so they’ll have a lot lower start-

up cost,” he said.

Once a new owner overcomes those hurdles, he or she can develop a signature pizza style and identity for the business – which is the key to success in a keenly competitive field, where a lot of variation is possible, Woodruff said.

“There’s a lot of independent pizza places that are still serving pizzas,” Woodruff said. “Some of the micro-breweries are now making a pizza, or two, and a lot of nicer restaurants – RyeBelles has their own wood-fired oven for their pizzas.”

As crucial as it is, that mixture of identity and style is often the hardest to get right, which is why success isn’t assured, Woodruff said.

“Service is still important. However, people let you know really fast if they like your pizza or not,” Woodruff said. “If people like the way you prepare your crust – thin, deep dish, big pieces, little (pieces) – that’s where they start, and (then), with your sauce. Hopefully, there’s a good combination, so that’s what you need. You need to make it a little different.”

