

Story by Mandy Wolf Detwiler
Photos by Melissa Mann

“Margaret, your order’s up! Margaret!” comes the voice over the loud speaker. But the senior management team at Dion’s Pizza doesn’t pause. It’s just the way orders at the 13-unit Albuquerque, New Mexico, chain are announced.

Bill Scott and Jon Patten didn’t start out to open a pizzeria. Instead, they wanted to open a little Greek restaurant in Albuquerque. Michigan natives, Scott and Patten were tired of the snow and cold, and, as Scott admits, “I don’t

think we cared where we were going. We just wanted some place nice.”

After placing a bid on a sign for their new restaurant, circa 1978, they found themselves a bit short of cash. To reduce their costs, the sign maker suggested reducing the number of letters on their signage, and Dionysus was shortened to Dion’s. Folks in Albuquerque mispronounced it as “DEE-ohns” and the name stuck.

Initially, they used the existing equipment to crank out pizzas before expanding into a Greek menu. “We came out with a Greek salad, and some other Greek items, including gyros,” Jon says. “We sold gyros for about three or

Albuquerque chain
revels in its simplicity

Dyno-mite!



Pictured from left to right: (front row) Mark Herman and Doug Morse; (back row) John Patten and Bill Scott. The foursome guide Dion’s in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The 13-unit chain tallied \$29 million in sales last year.





Dion's keeps things simple, from its menu to its systems.

four months. A couple of cowboys came in, (and) bought a couple of gyros. They sat down, then they came back and slapped them down on the counter. They said, 'This is the worst burrito we've ever had!'"

"What was in it was lamb," says Scott. "They said, 'We don't eat lamb out here! This is beef country!' People wanted pizza. That's what this place used to be. They just kept coming in for that. We did get some customers, we inherited some, but not many. Our first day in business, we did \$28."

Its owners went back to the drawing board, streamlined their menu, and uti-

lized the services of a former Florida pizzeria owner who helped them formulate their Old World dough, test recipes and use customer feedback.

Dion's today is a far cry from those early days. The single unit has evolved to a total of 13 throughout the Albuquerque area, all corporate owned. Sales totaled \$29 million last year and are expected to increase 20 percent this year. The restaurants average about 5,200 square feet with 165 seats and use air decks to bake their pies.

Ask an Albuquerque resident where they buy pizza, and they're likely to say

Dion's. Why? Patten and Scott claim the food quality that keeps customers loyal. "Bill and I have developed that from the very beginning," says Patten. "We work on our quality consistently—both our processes and how we make it, the freshness of it and in the ingredients that we buy."

Although a commissary is now used to service the 13 units and "helps at the bulk level," says Scott, Dion's Pizza units still do much on-site, including chopping all of their own vegetables, shredding lettuce and slicing meat and making dough and sauce. That keeps it fresh and ready to use.

And the company's popularity certainly isn't from marketing—it's strictly grassroots advertising here. There's no couponing, no television or print media. Just programs like its school tours, bringing in grade-school age kiddies for a free shirt and tour of a restaurant. Those kids take that knowledge back home to their decision-making folks. And Dion's also sponsors an annual 5K run every year.

"There's a good population of transplants out here in Albuquerque," Scott says. "Most of those, from the Midwest or East, anyway. We've found there's a huge market for just traditional pizza. For the first 25 years, we just sold your basic pizza. Then we started getting into some of the gourmet stuff a few years ago."

Those include 10-inch pizzas priced at



\$5.39 each and are topped with such items as grilled chicken, artichoke hearts, pine nuts and Kalamata olives.

Despite that, the menu is surprisingly old-school: pizzas ranging from 12 to 16 inches (and also sold by the slice); salads; a few desserts like oversized brownies and cookies and non-alcoholic drinks. Weekly Dion's menu requires the use of 19,000 pounds of cheese, 22,500 pounds of flour, 12,500 heads of lettuce and more than 70,000 individual cups of salad dressing.

Although the second store opened just two years after the first, growth has been purposefully slow, with one opening every couple of years, says Scott. While many of the units were built into strip malls, new Dion's are being constructed as free-standing units with "drive-thrus."

"You can't order at our windows," says Scott, "but it allows people to call (their orders in) and then not have to come into the store, if they don't have shoes on, or their hair is in curlers or the kids are screaming."

Often, there's a line of vehicles waiting for pick-up stretched around the building.



Dion's managers will send out an employee to sort out who gets what, so by the time the customer reaches the window the order is hot and ready for pick-up with little confusion.

Carryout and pick-up account for 35 percent of the business. Delivery was offered at first, but "when we did delivery, our motto was 'Same day service,'" Pattensays. "That's great for flooring companies, but not good for a pizza company. So we decided that wasn't our strength. Food quality was our strength. So we decided we were just going to rely on our quality and not focus on delivery."

"What did it for me was when I was in court one day for running a traffic light delivering a pizza," adds Scott, "and there were two of my

drivers in the same courtroom for the same thing. I said, 'You know, there's got to be a better way of doing this.' We discovered that nobody can get the pizza home better or fresher than the owner of that pizza."

Officials say Dion's 800-plus employees are the key to its success. While that may sound like lip service, Dion's puts its money where its mouth is. Doug Morse, a former delivery driver, now serves as VP of corporate operations, while Mark Herman, a former Dion's pizza maker, is the VP of store operations. Employees at all levels are encouraged to grow personally and professionally and as a result, "our turnover is less than half of the industry average," Pattensays. "We do a lot more training than a lot of our competitors not just in the pizza industry, but in the restaurant industry overall. We offer a lot of higher level training not just, you know, how to make a pizza. Today we have people in a seminar that are learning about how to develop their own strengths and how to develop their own leadership abilities." Those employees serve as the face of the company and interact one-on-one with the customer.

"We still take all our orders by hand," says Herman. "We don't use any computerized entry order system. What we found is we want to be flexible for our customers and the most flexible way to do that is with pen and paper. When we've tried to computerize that, it slowed us down and hurt our ability to help our customers."

Though it does use technology to measure and track sales and distribution, Scott says the heavy ability to customize the menu is the main reason why Dion's hasn't moved to a point-of-sale system at the store level. "Customers will ask for certain things done a certain way. It was kind of hard to put it in a program because we'll pretty much do what the customers want as far as special requests. We started out that way years ago and we're still the same way. Using pen and paper gives us that flexibility."

Good customer service is then rewarded through the company's "Make It Happen" program in which outstanding employees are recognized. "Those kind of little things really help them realize that we're paying attention," Herman says.

So with a simple menu, rudimentary methods and steady growth, what's the future for this easy-going company? You might be surprised. Says Scott: "Our goal is 'Worldwide pizza domination by the year 3000. So we don't want to grow too quickly, but every year at every store our sales have gone up.' †

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