

## FRANCHISE & HOSPITALITY



Photo courtesy of Pizza Inn

# PIZZA PIZAZZ

Bob Singh is three-decade stalwart with Pizza Inn chain, as Mississippi area developer he cooks up more expansion

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GREENWOOD, Miss. — Bob Singh believes in the pizza business. It is one of the reasons he has been involved in the industry for over 30 years. With Pizza Inn he has even recently helped get his son into the business and continues to be a driving force for the brand, pushing the chain's growth in Mississippi.

As an area developer for Pizza Inn in Mississippi, Singh has 18 locations running in the state. The most recent is a location in Hattiesburg near the University of Southern Mississippi, which is operated by his son, Scott.

Singh operates six Pizza Inn locations and, as an area developer, is targeting 10 more locations in the region in the next several years.

According to Singh, the pizza industry offers a very economical dining option that suits what many consumers are looking for in the current economic climate.

Headquartered in Colony, Texas, Pizza Inn features traditional and specialty pizzas, as well as pasta, sandwiches, salads and desserts. The chain is publicly traded on Nasdaq and has approximately 310 franchised restaurants with three corporate-owned locations. Pizza Inn is located in 17 states, predominantly in the southern United States.

The chain's signature pizza line includes: Bacon Cheddar Ham, Bacon Cheeseburger, Taco Pizza and Chicken Fajita. Its Max Pizza line includes: Pepperoni Max, Veggie Max, Everything Monster and Meat Max.

Pizza Inn was started by two Texas brothers in 1958 across from Southern Methodist University in Dallas. The chain prides itself on its innovation and introduced its Taco Pizza in 1979, its first dessert "pizzert" pizza in 1986 and its bacon cheeseburger pizza in the 1990s.

Singh has been with Pizza Inn since 1979, when he opened his first store in Greenwood, Miss. He opened his second store in 1982 and added two

more over the next two years. Over his long time with Pizza Inn, Singh said there has been lot of leadership change in the chain and he feels this often hindered its overall growth. However, he said that the current leadership, led by chief executive officer Charlie Morrison, really has the chain on track.

The first beneficial thing current leadership did, from Singh's view, is to open up some corporate locations, which previous ownership had not done. Singh believes this has given corporate a stronger pulse on the pizza business.

"Now that they are operating stores ... they understand what the franchisee goes through and now they are able to help," said Singh.

The other big move that current ownership made was to launch a new Pizza Inn concept, according to Singh. Pizza Inn has traditionally focused on inn store dining and featured a lunch buffet. Now, the chain has added a diner buffet, as well as lunch buffet, and also added delivery. The new concept also has a new design and interior feel.

Singh plans to convert several of his stores to the new concept, a process he said will cost between \$75,000 to \$100,000 per conversion. He feels that the new concept is particularly well suited to locations in cities with over 50,000 people. He said he would encourage all of his franchisees in those size cities to feature the new concept.

Though there is a decent price tag to the conversion, Singh feels that most franchisees are open to it and excited about the advancements corporate is making to the chain.

"If you want to be a successful franchisee you have to get on board and do it," he said.

He, for one, welcomes the changes and does his best to sell the franchisees he works with on innovations. "Like the company, I have skin in the game," Singh said. "I believe in the system and I am putting it to work."

Singh first became an area developer for Pizza Inn in 1990. His first pledge to the company was to build 12 locations in five years. He did it in three.

His track record certainly suggests he will be able to deliver on the 10 new stores he has promised Pizza Inn over the next several years.

He has no doubts about the appeal of the pizza industry.

According to him, his stores had their best quarter ever to start this year and now, with a strong leadership team behind the chain and efforts to promote the brand, stores are pulling in \$1 million in volume on a yearly basis.

"Pizza Inn has operated well and changed with the times [I expected it to continue to do so]," Singh said.

Pizza Inn is going its part to push expansion. The chain had launched a development incentive program to attract franchisees. The program offers a 50 percent reduction in the initial franchise fee from \$25,000 to \$12,500, a 50 percent reduction in royalties for the first two years from 4 percent to 2 percent. The incentive is for new construction of U.S. buffet restaurants only.

Singh is a native of Punjab, India. He moved to England at a young age and began his professional career with British Steel, studying to be a metallurgist. He came to the United States in 1974 at the age of 21 and got a job working at a Sonic Drive-In franchise with a family friend from New Delhi, S.L. Sati.

Despite the industry switch, Singh saw his move as the best option for his professional career. "In England there was a lot of job security, but no opportunity," he said. "In the U.S., there was no job security, but tons of opportunity."

Working for Sati, Singh cut his teeth in the franchise industry at Sonic Drive-In and other brands, such as Western Sizzlin.

In addition to Pizza Inn, Singh's franchise holdings also include Sonic Drive-Ins and Western Sizzlin restaurants.

However, the pizza industry has always been a personal favorite.

"Of all the franchises I have worked in I like the pizza business the best," Singh said. "I have always enjoyed Pizza Inn."

"Pizza was a very clean business. I had good interaction with the customers. That is what I enjoy a lot," Singh added. "Plus, I enjoy pizza."