



October 25, 2009

WOMEN IN BUSINESS: Barbara Wilkinson

By Paul Sullivan

Special to the Advertiser

A family's love for pizza every Friday night has led to a new career for Barbara Wilkinson, who owns and operates CheeZies Pizza along with her husband, Jay.

She left her job as an executive assistant to open a pizza place off Atlanta Highway across from Arrowhead in east Montgomery. But the final decision was not made before receiving the green light from the pizza experts at home.

After looking at food service companies on the Internet, the couple locked in on a pizza franchise operation based in Tulsa, Okla. They went to try the pizza at the nearest shop, which was in Piedmont. They liked what they ate, but the decision wasn't made yet.

Leftover slices were given to the couple's children and the pizza received a thumbs-up. The test for pizza is how good it is the next day, Barbara Wilkinson explained. The company's creation had passed a true taste test.

Then it was off to Oklahoma for a weeklong experience in learning the pizza business from opening the door to closing, she said.

"We did everything that our employees do," she said. "We called it PU -- Pizza University."

In April the couple opened the first of what they plan will be a group of three restaurants in Montgomery. The Wilkinsons have run Cornerstone Refinishing for years, but were looking for something they could both have a hand in.

"We always wanted to operate some kind of business together," Barbara Wilkinson said. "We liked working with people and meeting people."

Now the couple and their employees, three of whom are their children, are busy serving customers, churches, schools and others who enjoy the pizza and the price.

The price of the pizza is what sets CheeZies apart in a competitive industry, Barbara Wilkinson said.

"Our niche in the market is lower cost and high quality," she said. "A lot of people are surprised it tastes so good for the price."

She said the pizza's cost -- \$4.99 for a large carryout pepperoni or cheese pizza -- has been a blessing as consumers search for a bargain during challenging times.

"We came in when the economy was down, and we are a perfect match for the economy," she said. "We have specialty pizzas that are cheaper than anyone's in town."

A large specialty pizza goes for \$8.99. CheeZies doesn't deliver, except to groups who call ahead, which is one way costs are kept down, Barbara Wilkinson said.

CheeZies also serves calzones, wings, breadsticks and cinna-sticks.

The Lee High School graduate shared more about the pizza enterprise and the couple's plans.

Q What do you like about the job?

A I like working for myself and the rewards of running your own business. The rewards are getting to make your own decisions and managing your own time and working as a family. And I like the public's response to the product we offer.

How has been the public's response?

It has been great -- better than expected.

How many hours a week do you work at the store?

I work about 20 hours here at the store, and about 20 hours building the business, marketing and doing paperwork.

What is your biggest challenge?

Our biggest challenge is keeping food costs down, especially with the rising cost of cheese. There has been a gradual increase in product prices since we opened on April 21.

What are your plans?

We plan to open our second store in December at the corner of Bell and Vaughn behind the CVS. Our goal is to open at least three stores in Montgomery.

Do you see any trends in the industry?

We like to keep it simple. If you get too diversified with menu, your quality is not there.

Does your family still eat pizza every Friday night?

When we first opened, we were taking pizza home all the time. Now we are down to once a week. We seem to always have a CheeZies box in the refrigerator. It's great when friends of the children come over.
