

Texas rink owner gains overnight success with addition of Pizzeria

By Jim Morris

When the owners of The Skatin' Place in Abilene, Texas, decided they needed more space for their snack bar/party room, they realized there was only one way to go: in.

"We knocked down a wall and used about 10 feet of our skating floor," said Jeff Groban, owner of the 21,000-square-foot skating center for the past 13 years. "We realized we just didn't have enough space for birthday parties. Our party business kept getting better, but we didn't have any place to put (the children)."

Although it meant a major remodeling project, building their party business was worth it. Then, about three years ago, the expansion became even more important when Groban discovered another big boon to business: pizza.

"I went to the (RSA) convention looking for some new ideas and got to talking to some people about pizza," he recalled. "Other people were doing it with a conveyor belt pizza oven, so I thought we'd give it



With the addition of a pizza oven and expansion of the snack bar/birthday party seating, The Skatin' Place in Abilene, Texas has become quite popular.

a try. I stopped in to see a couple of other people's operations while I was

traveling, too, just to get a good idea about what I wanted to do."

So the snack bar at The Skatin' Place became the Pizzeria. And it was an overnight success.

"The people love it and they tell us all the time," Groban said. "Of course kids like it, but the parents like it, too. When we have the PTA school skate nights, we encourage families to come, have pizza for dinner and skate."

Because the Pizzeria was becoming so popular, Groban invested in new picnic-type tables with seats and put in a couple of flat-screen televisions for parents to watch while the kids are skating.

"We try to do something to update the rink each year. We've put in new lights, a fog machine and new carpet in the last couple of years," he said.

The pizza business has grown consistently since it was started in 2006. In fact, it's to the point where Groban is thinking about investing in a second oven.

"The one we have does a good job, but when you have a party that needs five or six pizzas and you have other orders, there are times when we could use another," he said.

One reason he thinks the pizza business inside his rink has been so good is the way his employees make them. He buys frozen, preformed crusts at Sam's Club. His employees add the sauce, cheese and other ingredients and then run the 16-inch pies through the oven.

The rink charges \$12 for a cheese pizza with \$1 more for either pepperoni or sausage. Or you can buy it for \$1.25 per slice. They also offer packages, such as a pizza and a pitcher of soft drink for \$15. Other promotions tie pizza in with use of the facilities.

"We probably have \$4 to \$5 in each pizza, so there's a pretty good mark-up," he said.

Although Groban doesn't advertise his Pizzeria outside the rink, word has gotten around. His take-out business has picked up, but it's mostly from people who are at the rink and want to take home leftovers or maybe a whole pie for dinner.

"We're not really set up to have a carryout business," he said. "When people want pizza at home, they usually have it delivered from a pizza place anyway."

But to make sure people coming to rink know about the Pizzeria, he includes "pizza" on all printed flyers and it has a prominent place, with pictures, on his Web site, skatin-placeabilene.com.

Groban uses Sam's for many of his snack bar items. One thing he usually picks up, when available, is Sam's cotton candy.

"I'll get 10 or 12 cases at a time," he said. "The kids really go for it."

So there you have it: pizza for dinner, cotton candy for dessert, and a business that keeps growing. What could be better?

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