

Sandella's Flatbread



It's in the title. Whatever you're having at Sandella's Flatbread, the main ingredient is always the same. "That's probably what makes us most unique, that we make all of our products with one simple piece of bread," says Mike Stimola, Sandella's founder and president. That's not to say there isn't choice at Sandella's; the menu runs 80 items long. And while the bread is a plain, centuries-old Middle-Eastern recipe, flavor abounds in the fixings.

Stimola opened Sandella's, named for his wife, Sandy, and mother, Ella Jane, in 1994 in West Redding, Connecticut, and offered traditional sandwiches on baguettes and artisan breads. He introduced flatbread in 1996, a novel concept back then. "We spent a lot of time educating our customers about flatbread and the difference between flatbread and tortillas." After developing new ways to use the flatbread—for pizzas, paninis, quesadillas, salads, and rice and noodle bowls—Stimola eventually dropped his other breads and added Flatbread to the name.

"The flatbread just worked for us," he says. "You could really taste the ingredients of the sandwich, and it made our operation relatively simple." The basic difference, by the way, between the flour-water-salt recipe for flatbread and flour tortillas is the vegetable shortening added to keep tortillas soft. "Today, many of the products being sold as flatbread contain preservatives and fat to make them flexible; not ours," Stimola says. Sandella's bread is a traditional lavash, soft when fresh but dries to a crispy cracker-like texture.

The crispy texture is perfect for quesadillas and thin-crust pizzas. Quesadilla selections range from barbecue to beef fajita, while the pizza list includes Brazilian and pesto chicken.

Salads and noodle and rice bowls are served over a soft flatbread pushed into a bowl. Options include Caesar, Cobb, and Greek salads and chicken fajita, Mediterranean, and mesquite barbecue bowls.

Wraps and paninis choices range from beef, chicken, and pork to turkey and vegetarian varieties. Some locations serve breakfast wraps. The top-selling menu item is the Chicken Verona

wrap (grilled chicken, roasted red peppers, tomatoes, and mozzarella cheese with Sandella's pesto mayo).

"We impart flavoring in all of our menu items with our special sauces," Stimola says. "When we started out you couldn't buy chipotle mayonnaise. We had to buy the mayonnaise and spice it up ourselves, and explain what chipotle peppers were. But now with people's taste profiles evolving, that's a more mainstream item."

As unusual as some of the sauces is the way Sandella's has grown. Most of locations are on college campuses through contracts with Sodexo, Compass, and universities that manage their own foodservice. Sandella's is also prevalent in the travel plazas students frequent to and from college. Of the 138 locations, six are traditional inline stores, called cafés. And with the launch of franchising in January, the company intends to focus on growing the café model, which is about 1,500 square feet, with warm colors, comfortable seating, and free Wi-Fi.

"Our stores are very simple to operate," Stimola says. "There are no hoods, grills, or fryers. We make everything in a simple four-step process in front of the customer. The key is how the products are brought to the store. Everything is pre-cooked and pre-sliced; all the sauces are made and brought in. We've spent a lot of years working to streamline the process. It's key to have a consistent product to grow nationally."

WHY IT BEARS WATCHING: Sandella's was ahead of the curve in offering its array of flatbread selections before most consumers knew what flatbread was. And now in preparing for national growth, Stimola says he'll have a competitive advantage in convenience by operating with leading edge technology.

"Ninety percent of our transactions are plastic," Stimola says. "We accept a wide range of ways to pay, including by telephone texting. On college campuses, you can go online with your student ID number and order, pay, and have it delivered. We plan to implement those technologies in office environments."

Sandella's plans to develop 15 to 25 master franchise operations nationwide and recently signed two 50-store agreements, one in the Virginia/Maryland/District of Columbia area and the other in the Los Angeles/Orange County region. "Our vision is to have 1,000 stores open or in development by 2010," Stimola says.

With an easy build out for inline stores and reasonably-priced but premium-grade menu items, Stimola believes the concept will appeal to experienced operators willing to open several locations. [REDACTED]

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"The good thing about college campuses is they have a vocal customer base, so it's a good place to learn," Stimola says.

Sandella's Flatbread CEO: Mike Stimola HQ: West Redding, Connecticut Year started: 1994 Annual sales: [REDACTED] www.sandellas.com
