



Chris Wiley

Oz Pizza | East Point, GA

In 1997, Chris and his friend, David Howard, opened Oz Pizza in downtown Decatur. Eventually, Oz Pizza grew into East Point, Fairburn and Fayetteville, all cities they saw as tight-knit communities they wanted to be a part of. The pair wanted to bring New York-style pizza, a piece of the city to the suburbs, and has since donated over \$43,000 to local communities.

Where are you from + what led you to open a business in East Point?

I grew up in Kokomo, Indiana, but moved to Atlanta in the mid-80s. I'm very passionate about cycling, and joined a cycling group that looped through downtown and some smaller communities on the outskirts of the city – where I was able to identify many future Oz Pizza locations.

What kind of work did you do before opening Oz Pizza?

I was a general manager at another pizza restaurant prior to opening Oz Pizza. My business partner David was working in construction at the time, but eventually we put our brains together to build Oz. In 1997 it was Decatur, 2001 came East Point, then 2004 Fairburn, 2011 Douglasville and 2016 Fayetteville.

Can you tell us a little more about Oz Pizza?

The pizza is a thin crust, New York-style slice. We wanted Oz Pizza to be the type of place where kids from the local neighborhood could work, spend time with each other and take part in the community. All of our pizzas are made with homemade sauces, the most popular of course being a classic slice of pepperoni.

Can you tell us about how your first day of business went? What does it look like now?

At the time, “mom and pop” restaurants were not present in these smaller communities, and we wanted each location to be in the heart of that city’s downtown. Finding the right staff is key and is still a huge emphasis of our business today. We want to truly take care of our employees in every respect and treat them like family. Every job here is teachable, so we really look for good people to join the team - and just want everyone to be happy. Many people have been with our team for 10+ years. Now, we continue to rely on word-of-mouth promotion as opposed to traditional advertising – we really embrace our small business-roots.

Did you have any specific goals for Oz Pizza before opening? If so, what did that look like, and has it changed along the way?

When first opening the Decatur location, we honestly were completely winging it. We saw a spot for rent and decided to go for it. Eventually, we wanted to spread far and wide, with locations in many cities, but decided to switch business models following the 2008 financial crisis. Instead of spreading rapidly, we focused on the cities we currently had locations in and doing everything we could to maximize those that already existed. We love being in a smaller city. We are close with our local community and feel comfortable reaching out to local officials if we ever need assistance or guidance, and taking part in discussions. It's a win-win for both parties, and there's enough support to go around.

What is your favorite thing about being a part of this community?

Seeing the community come together day-by-day with appreciation and support is amazing. For instance, when COVID-19 hit, locals held fundraisers and ordered to-go to help sustain local businesses. City government reached out to us, and it was personal. They allowed us to expand into the downtown park area with tables and patio furniture so customers could eat in the park. It was another win-win situation, because East Point's downtown looked lively and bustling as people drove past.

How has your community changed from the time you opened Oz Pizza to now? How do you hope your community will continue to grow in the coming years?

Smaller downtown areas typically come in waves of growth. You get the "pop" of new restaurants, businesses, etc. but smaller communities are hit the hardest during tough financial times. When momentum picks up, it's great, but these smaller communities often hit a standstill in hard times.

What is a business accomplishment you're really proud of?

Being around for 23 years!

Did you have any mentors or people you admired when starting Oz Pizza?

In the beginning, it was pure bootstrapping it. But now, we take leadership courses to continue our learning.