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A mellow destination

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By Jenny Andreasson
Observer Staff

It's difficult to categorize the pizza at Mellow Mushroom.

The Winter Park restaurant, one of more than 90 franchise locations throughout the South, serves up funky-named pies that don't resemble the thin, floured dough made famous in New York or the thick, flaky variety out of Chicago.

"It's Southern hippy pizza," says Chuck Votey, who opened the Aloma Avenue franchise location with his wife, Stacey, about four years ago.

The whole-wheat pizza dough, which carries a hint of sweetness, is hand-tossed and topped with a high-grade, low-fat mozzarella cheese. To further enhance nutritional value, all meat toppings are pre-cooked so fat can drain off, Stacey said.

"It's healthy food," said Mellow patron Silas Ottman. "There's really nothing else like this."

Aleesa Ponce, who dines at Mellow twice a month, said the Kosmic Karma pizza, which features spinach, pesto, feta cheese, sun-dried tomatoes and fresh tomatoes, "rocks the house." "This is the best pizza in town," she said.

Another favorite, Chuck said, is the Magical Mystery Tour, which features button and portobello mushrooms, jalapenos, spinach, pesto and feta cheese. They also carry 21 micro-brew beers on tap, including locally brewed Orange Blossom Pilsner. Sample trays, with four 5-ounce glasses, are available.

The atmosphere at Mellow Mushroom is much like its pizza selection. The building, a former Boston Market, is covered with hand-painted pictures of mushrooms. A mural on the covered patio features the members of The Beatles playing golf beneath a star-filled sky. The stars even twinkle at night. Chuck said the inspiration was the Beatles song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" with a bit of Florida flavor.

Each Mellow Mushroom has a different theme, he said, although all locations use the same menu. The Votey's are set to open a second location in the Waterford Lakes area in mid-January. That restaurant will have a Key West theme.

Chuck and Stacey have not been affected by the economic downturn. In fact, their numbers are still going up. "We're up 15 percent from last year," Stacey said, knocking on the wooden table. "I knock every time I say that."

Just four years ago, the couple lived in Atlanta. Chuck worked in computers and Stacey was a children's counselor. They were frequent patrons of the Mellow Mushroom there, and one day Stacey came home and said, "We could own one of these," Chuck recalled. Now they're the happiest they've ever been.

"This, for us and our personalities, is the perfect job," Stacey said.

Funky pizza joint

The Mellow Mushroom, at 2015 Aloma Ave., serves up eclectic pizza pies and 21 types of micro-brew beers. The Winter Park restaurant is open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Takeout is available by calling 407-657-7755. Visit MellowMushroom.com to learn more.

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