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'Extreme' addition to local pizza scene

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The latest addition to the retail shops at Ramz Hall, Extreme Pizza opened its doors Sept. 28 to a steady stream of VCU students and Richmond locals curious about the first new pizza place in town since California Pizza Kitchen opened at Short Pump Town Center two years ago.

Like CPK, Extreme Pizza is a California chain, and it uses innovative recipes with Pacific-Southwest influences to provide pizza with new flavor. Unlike CPK, Extreme Pizza is geared toward the college crowd, with pictures reflecting its founder's love of extreme sports featured prominently in each location. No surprise, then, that it was one of the first sponsors of the X Games, an annual competition for extreme sports.

Extreme Pizza started out in 1994 as a small business on San Francisco's Fillmore Street, a trendy nightclub district with intense competition for flavorful pizza where shops with names like Pizza Orgasmica compete for partygoers' attention - and their taste buds. With several locations up and down the West Coast, their Richmond location marks their first foray east of the Mississippi.

Why Richmond? It might be because VCU has one of the largest liberal arts student populations on the East Coast, and many West Coast locations found their success in being located near campuses with students hungry for something other than the ordinary slice of cheese.

Enter Extreme Pizza. With nine kinds of cheeses to choose from, the era of the boring pizza slice is over. Soy, gorgonzola, sage, cilantro and pepperoncini are just a few of the varied toppings available to the distinguishing palate. Not sure what you want? Signature pizzas like "Peace in the Middle East," "The Screaming Tomato" and "Poultrygeist" await your selection.

For those over the age of 21, cold beer and wine is available in the California tradition, and for everyone else, Pepsi products flow from the fountain. I'm a Coke fan, but after tasting these pizzas I can understand why Pepsi is a better complement - it has a smoother taste that lets the distinct flavor of the pizzas shine through.

There are plenty of vegetarian choices, too. One low-fat offering, the "White Out," comes with all the vegetables and no cheese. Vegans can choose soy as well.

The usual pizza sidekicks are available - buffalo wings, for one, but there are also salads, calzones and subs. Pizzas are made to order right in front of you at a topping station that looks more like a Subway sub shop than a pizza place, and the pizzas roll through an automatic oven that leaves the pies coming out toasty fresh.

Prices range from a reasonable \$2.25 for one of the generous daily slice offerings to about \$4-6.50 for an 8-inch "indee" personal-sized pizza. For extremely large appetites, there's the \$13 to \$24 "huge" 18-inch. A helpful scale in the menu and below the counter tells you how many people each size will feed (for the record: the huge feeds four to six).

Other than the stuffed deep-dish offerings, Extreme pizzas come in only one kind of crust. It's somewhere between thin and thick, toasty but chewy. Because the toppings and cheese are the main attraction, the crust doesn't get in the way, but it's a perfect complement. It's as though the crust's creators took Aristotle's Golden Mean to heart before setting to their work.

Forget the fake Sbarro at Shafer Court Dining Center; this is where you'll find the freshness and the flavor.

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