

LaRosa's coming to Central Ohio with Dublin pizzeria

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The LaRosa's Family Pizzeria family soon will include Central Ohio.

The 60-year-old Cincinnati institution has secured [Brandon Salamone](#) as its first area franchisee and 7048 Hospital Drive in Dublin as its first pizzeria here.

"I didn't feel like I had a choice," Salamone joked. "When you grow up in Cincinnati, (LaRosa's) is a part of life, like the Reds, the Bengals, Graeter's Ice Cream, Skyline Chili. They had my order on stand-by."

The company [began its hunt for a Columbus franchisee](#) more than a year ago with a tasting event in the Polaris area. Salamone, a resident of Columbus since 2005, attended not just to get a LaRosa's fix but to pursue a franchise.

He had a good pitch: Besides his native Cincinnati pizza exuberance, he is a seasoned restaurant franchise operator with the J. Gumbo's cajun and creole chain. He has expanded his holdings with J. Gumbo's to six restaurants in five years – in Gahanna, Polaris, the Ohio State University campus area, Cleveland and two in Little Rock, Ark.

"They were looking for the right person with a track record, someone who knows the brand well," Salamone said.

His fellow investors in the LaRosa's business also know the brand, including his father, Tony, and cousins [Brian Monterosso](#) and Tony and [Ray Ruberg](#) – all Cincinnati natives.

The Dublin pizzeria will set up in a [former CiCi's Pizza storefront at Avery Square](#) and could open by late summer. Salamone said the 4,500-square-foot space is a nice fit for a LaRosa's operation, which will include a 140-seat dining room, a private room for groups and parties, and outdoor patio tables. LaRosa's offers dine-in, pick-up and delivery.

"It's a family dining experience," he said. "That's tailor-made for Dublin."

It isn't the only Cincinnati pizzeria chain to see that. Just last week, Dewey's Pizza [revealed plans for a restaurant](#) north of Avery Square.

LaRosa's [menu](#) includes hoagies, calzones, pasta, salads, appetizers and desserts. [See the slideshow for some samples.](#)

Salamone is confident the brand will be embraced, but he won't be too aggressive expanding.

"We know there's excitement, but we need to bring this not just to the Cincinnati transplants around town," he said. "One store at a time. We got to walk before we run."

He expects to take a year with the Dublin pizzeria before he looks for additional sites. "I trust my real estate guys immensely," he said. "They have their ear on the street."

Salamone is working with NAI Ohio Equities LLC brokers [Chris Howard](#) and Anthony Maronitis. He projects to open eight to 10 LaRosa's in Central Ohio.

The chain was founded in 1954 on Cincinnati's west side by [Buddy LaRosa](#). LaRosa's Inc. has grown to 64 pizzerias in Cincinnati and generates annual sales of \$138 million. It is the 14th-largest pizzeria chain in the U.S. by sales, says *Nation's Restaurant News*, and sales per pizzeria are tops among those chains. At \$2.1 million, according to the trade publication, it is more than double the per-store sales of Donatos Pizzeria LLC, which is second. The Columbus-based chain does more than \$1 million in receipts per pizzeria.

LaRosa's franchisee fee, according to the company, is \$25,000 with store opening costs, minus real estate expenses, at \$800,000 to \$1.45 million. The company charges a 4 percent royalty on net sales and a 4 percent [advertising fee](#).



Dan Eaton covers retailing and restaurants for Columbus Business First.