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Restaurateurs brew an optimistic view

Trade show attendees say their business isn't that bad

*BY CHRIS KRIDLER
FLORIDA TODAY*

Restaurants have felt the impact of the sagging economy, but amid the energy of the just-completed Florida Restaurant and Lodging Show in Orlando, some restaurateurs and vendors were serving something unusual to the menu these days: optimism.

At least in the pizza market, "it's been a good year," said Jerry Smith of Rockledge, a Florida territorial manager for Wisconsin-based Grande Cheese Company, as he handed out cheese, pizza and cannoli samples.

Though consumers have been cutting luxuries, "I don't think it got all that bad," Smith said. "People went down to pizza, but they still wanted quality pizza, so our independent pizzerias are doing fine."

Among the local restaurants his company supplies are Brooklyn Pizza & Pasta in Rockledge and Mezza Luna in old Eau Gallie.

Show vendors hawked everything and anything imaginable connected to the hospitality industry -- gourmet chocolate, pizza displays, ovens, menus, high-end ingredients, T-shirts and shoes -- and crowds of people plucked samples from trays offered at the numerous booths.

J.R. Harrison, who's been general manager of Pizza Gallery & Grill in Viera for a few months, said he went to the show to stay current on restaurant trends and make connections with fellow restaurateurs.

He's seen a renewed sense of enthusiasm at his restaurant.

"I think the economy's obviously still a little bit sluggish, so I think obviously the restaurants that are doing the right marketing and doing everything right are managing to stay aboveboard," he said.

"We're in our slow season right now, so we're feeling that a little bit," he added, "but we're doing well. Actually, our numbers are up a little bit from last year. So I think that just comes from serving a good product and employing the right employees and just doing the right thing, employing all of our core values, which are honesty, integrity and enthusiasm."

Culinary students from Keiser University in Melbourne entered competitions at the show and shopped for jobs.

"This is an excellent venue for them right now because they get to come here, they get to network," said Deborah Buza, a chef and instructor at the school.

"We were just over at the bread place, and we found out that he's accepting externs for positions, so this is a great place for students to network themselves and get those positions that they really need."

Contact Kridler at 242-3633 or ckridler@floridatoday.com.