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Raspberry Coke? Vanilla Sprite? LaRosa's changing it up with Coke Freestyle



Tom Demeropolis

Business Courier

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#)

I have tasted the future, and it is Raspberry Coke.

That's just one of more than 100 soft drink flavors customers can order at the **LaRosa's Inc.** restaurant in Stone Creek Town Center, thanks to **Coca-Cola Co.**'s new Freestyle fountain.

I visited the Colerain Township location on Thursday to learn more about the machine. And to taste a few carbonated creations.



First of all even the “crew” version of the Freestyle, one used by staff instead the self-serve machines found at restaurants such as Firehouse Subs, has a sleek design. There's only one dispenser, but the multitude of flavors never mix.

Instead of the bulky box-and-bag style used for traditional soda fountains, the Freestyle uses cartridges – think ink cartridges for a printer – full of syrups and flavorings. Using a touch screen, the server picks the main drink, then any flavorings they might want to add.

Press pour, and the concoction is instantly gushes into your glass.

Patrick Lynch, the general manager of the Stone Creek LaRosa's, said it's been easy to adjust to using the Freestyle, even though it only has one dispenser. And the most popular drink?

Raspberry Coke.

Since the Freestyle was installed at the beginning of August, soft drink sales at LaRosa's are up about 33 percent, said **Pete Busciani**, executive vice president of marketing for LaRosa's.

Busciani downplayed the increase, since this was the only LaRosa's location with the Freestyle operating, but he said the jump in sales did surprise him.

“I thought 10-12 percent increase. I didn't imagine it would be over 30,” he said.

LaRosa's has committed to putting the fountain in five stores this year and is looking at additional locations for 2012. It has installed two Coca-Cola Freestyles in its Mount Orab location. The White Oak LaRosa's is scheduled to switch over to the Willy Wonka of soda fountains next.

In addition to offering customers more drink options, the machine helps the business. It takes up less space than a traditional soda fountain, it has the ability to accurately measure how much syrup is left in each cartridge, and the cartridges are delivered to the front of the store via UPS.

For someone like Buscani, who doesn't drink caffeine and avoids sugar, his drink choices at a traditional fountain are limited. Now, it's as if he's standing in the soda aisle at the grocery store.

"I have a choice. I got caffeine free Diet Coke with lemon. I'll try it with lime. And why not orange and vanilla?" he said.

Soda, or pop if you prefer, options include Coke, Sprite, Fanta, Vault, Dr. Pepper and Barq's Root Beer. On the low-calorie/no calorie side, the machine dispenses Coke Zero, Diet Coke, Caffeine Free Diet Coke, Sprite Zero, Fanta Zero, Diet Dr. Pepper and Diet Barq's.

Then, customers can personalize with cherry, raspberry, orange, vanilla, lime, cherry vanilla, and other flavors.

In addition to sodas, the machine also dispenses Hi-C, Minute Maid Lemonade, Powerade, and flavored Dasani water.

Buscani said as the Freestyles roll out, he can already see demand coming for delivery of unique Freestyle drinks like peach Sprite or Coke Zero with lemon to go with Baked Buddys and calzones. The company is looking into getting four-cup trays for delivery.

In addition to LaRosa's, Coca-Cola Freestyle machines will be installed in all Firehouse Subs locations across the nation. Firehouse Subs is offering a free-drink happy hour from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. today at its three Cincinnati locations.

The Freestyle is now in more than 900 outlets in 60 markets across the country.

Have you tried a drink from a Coca-Cola Freestyle? Do you have a new favorite? Let me know at tdemeropolis@bizjournals.com or [@BizCourier_TomD](https://twitter.com/BizCourier_TomD) on Twitter.