



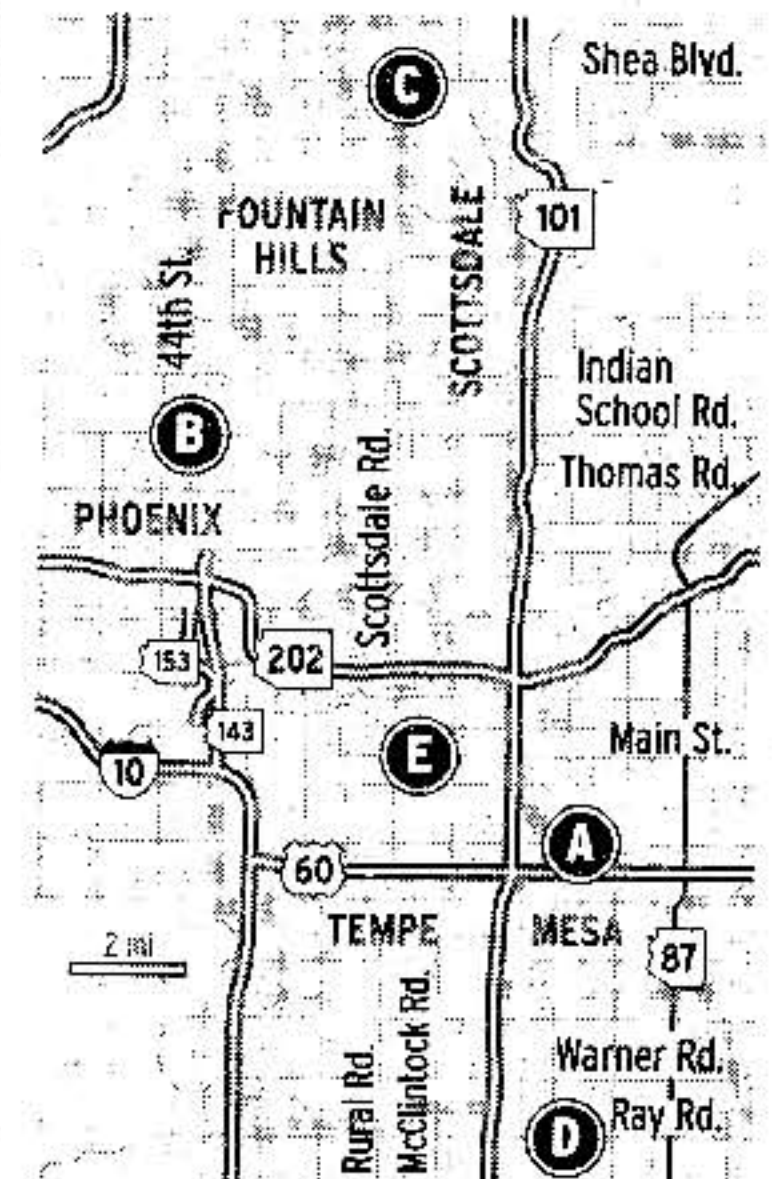
NEWEST LOCATION: From left, Fouad Khodr, Nelly Kohsok, and Bassel Osmani, owners of Pita Jungle restaurants located around the Valley, stand outside their latest site in Mesa.

LISA OLSON, TRIBUNE

Pita Jungle

Pita Jungle, a privately owned chain of restaurants that started in Tempe, is expanding.

- A** NEW: 1850 W. Southern Ave., Mesa
- B** 4340 E. Indian School Rd., Arcadia
- C** 7366 E. Shea Blvd., Scottsdale
- D** 1949 W. Ray Rd., Chandler
- E** 1250 E. Apache Blvd., Tempe



Gabriel Utasi/TRIBUNE

For growing Pita Jungle, it's an expansion out there in Valley

Chain to open its fifth location in January; sixth may not be far behind

By DAVID WOODFILL
TRIBUNE

In 1994, Pita Jungle was a tiny bistro in an aging Tempe strip mall that was run by three college students.

Demonstrating that a jungle can blossom in the desert, the chain's fifth location is set to open by January, at 1850 W. Southern Ave. in Mesa and the owners hope to start a franchise location in Gilbert in Spring 2008.

Pita Jungle's owners — Fouad Khodr, Bassel Osmani and Nelly Kohsok — met while attending Arizona State University.

The three were vegetarians and said the only place to eat was at the now-defunct Gentle Strength Cooperative.

Khodr said he and his partners opened the first store on Apache Boulevard and Terrace Street in Tempe with their own money. "We did everything ourselves," he said. "We were working about 14 hours a day."

The trio said that when they opened the first location, their original intention was to make it profitable and then sell it. That was before they realized how popular the eatery would

become with locals.

"It seems like second nature now," Kohsok said. "Now we feel it's more like (our) own baby."

The restaurant's menu features an eclectic array of fresh and healthy foods like seared and wood-fired salmon, spicy mango shrimp, black bean burgers and wood-fired pizzas.

Osmani described the restaurant's ambiance as naturalistic, fashionable and edgy.

Kohsok said the trio implements the colors and elements of the Valley's natural habitat in Pita Jungles' decor.

She said the group has no set business strategy and opens new restaurants whenever they feel ready. "(We're)

just taking it one step at a time," Kohsok said. "One store a year is really good for us."

Steve Chuceri, president and CEO of the Arizona Restaurant and Hospitality Association, said the Pita Jungle owners have demonstrated a strong business acumen by carving out their own unique niche.

He said Pita Jungle should continue to do well as the Valley's restaurant sector grows.

"One of the key ingredients to a restaurant's success is having a well thought out and balanced business plan, and clearly they have that," he said.

CONTACT WRITER:

(480) 898-6542

or dwoodfill@evtrib.com