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Nick Epler, a University of Idaho graduate, had always wanted to own a business. He opened his first Pita Pit in Downtown Boise in 2006. College towns are prime locations for his restaurants, he says.

Young franchisee expands Pita Pit

Nick Epler opened his fifth location in April and hopes to open up a shop in Nampa

BY HOLLY BEECH

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The economic downturn can put a damper on job opportunities. But for 30-year-old Nick Epler of Boise, the slump is just what he needed to expand his career as a restaurant owner.

The economy has lowered the cost of opening a restaurant because leases and labor to build are cheaper, Epler said. Also, recessions typically lead to higher college enrollment, which benefits the Pita Pits in col-

lege towns, he said.

"We wanted to get as close as possible to (Boise State)," he said.

About 50 percent of the Broadway store's market is from college students, Epler said, and he expects that number to increase by 10 percent this school year.

Part of the Pita Pit philosophy is to build in college towns, said Corey Bowman, vice president of franchise development for Pita Pit.

"In Moscow and Pullman, nearly 100 percent of the market is from the colleges,"

Epler said.

Pita Pit fills a void in the restaurant industry between the dollar menu and a sit-down restaurant that costs around \$15, Epler said. "Pitas fall in the \$5 to \$6 range. It's a fresh, healthy product compared to just grabbing what is cheapest."

Epler, who has a bachelor's degree in marketing from the University of Idaho — didn't always dream of working in the restaurant industry, he said, but he knew he wanted to

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own his own business — a dream inspired by growing up in a family-owned company in northern Idaho.

Four years ago, Epler started with one Downtown Boise Pita Pit restaurant. He was working in real estate when Bowman — whom he knew from college — gave him a heads up that the Downtown store was going to be for sale. Epler got a loan of \$250,000 and invested his savings to buy the store.

"Everything that I had, every penny that (my wife and I) had managed to save up, we put into that store," Epler said.

Epler said he has a great partnership with his wife, Jenny, whose income as a pharmaceutical sales representative allows him to invest his own earnings into the business.

His financial investment

is "one of the biggest reasons why we have grown," he said. "This is my life investment thus far, so if it fails it'd be essentially losing everything."

Epler has two franchises in Boise and others in Meridian, Moscow and Pullman, Wash. He hopes to open a store in Nampa and another in Boise. In 2009, he was named the company's Franchisee of the Year.

"He's the guy who's not afraid to work and get out there and take risks, which is what we needed in Boise," Bowman said.

After a year and a half of owning the Downtown Pita Pit, sales grew by 25 percent, Epler said. Though the Downtown store's sales declined by 10 percent from 2008 to 2009, they're now back up by more than 20 percent from what they were when he purchased the store, he said. He attributes the decline in sales to the poor economy, but that is also what allowed him to

buy the Moscow, Pullman and Broadway stores, he said.

Epler has a vision for expansion, Bowman said.

"My attitude is that I'm young and there is no better time for me to put the time in to be successful than right now. I'm not afraid to work," he said.

For the first couple weeks after buying the Downtown store, Epler put in 20-hour workdays, seven days a week, he said. Now, after organizing his staff and store policies, he averages a 10-hour workday, six days a week.

Money is not his motivation, Epler said. "At some stores, my managers make more from the store than I do."

Ultimately, his goal is to have successful stores to provide for his family, and perhaps leave the restaurants to his children. He and his wife are expecting their first child in December.

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