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30 Years of Pizza at Gumby's

By [Michaela Steakley](#)

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Alex Landry (top center), a 23-year-old UF alum, chews cheesy pizza with his group of friends who call themselves “The Gumby Guys” at Gumby’s Pizza’s 30th anniversary on Oct. 26, 2015. The group has been meeting at Gumby’s every Wednesday after Bible study for about 7 years. On Wednesday’s, Gumby’s has \$0.50 pizza rolls. “For college kids,” Landry said, “it’s the dream.”

Photo by [John Hursh](#) | The Independent Florida Alligator

It all began with two fraternity brothers.

Chance Hippler was a 21-year-old business student when he approached Jeff O’Brien, another member of UF’s Alpha Tau Omega fraternity, with the idea of opening a pizza restaurant.

The two dropped out of UF in 1985 and opened their first store that same year in downtown Gainesville.

They combined their savings and used a bank loan, co-signed by their parents, to begin building the business. At the time, O'Brien, 20, was too young to have his name on the liquor license.

"That was it," O'Brien said. "There was no more financial help from our parents."

But on Monday, Hippler and O'Brien celebrated the 30th anniversary of Gumby's Pizza and Wings. The restaurant, which first opened in Gainesville in 1985, now has restaurants near nine universities across the country.

"Thirty years is a long time," Hippler said. "But it's been quite a run."

Sitting in a booth at the restaurant, which has since moved to 34th Street, the two men reflected on how Gumby's has grown.

"We didn't know anything about pizza — literally," O'Brien said.

But now, the co-founders take pictures and autograph T-shirts when people find out they are the men behind Gumby's and their famed Pokey Stix — hand tossed pizza dough covered in garlic, butter and mozzarella cheese.

The most memorable recognition for the founders, Hippler said, came in 1991 when a Florida State University student broke into the state capitol building in Tallahassee and made a list of demands for the police.

The first item on the list was a 20-inch veggie pizza from Gumby's with extra jalapeños.

That day, more than 1,000 20-inch veggie pizzas with extra jalapeños were ordered from Gumby's restaurants across the country, Hippler said.

Hippler proudly displays a framed newspaper article about the standoff with a copy of the note on the wall by the cash register.

"It's been a rollercoaster, but it's been fun," O'Brien said.

The restaurant is still a favorite among locals as well.

For the past three years, Douglas Tam, a UF pharmacy graduate student, has gone to Gumby's every Wednesday with friends from his Bible study group for 50-cent pepperoni rolls.

"I'm trying to be somewhat consistent," the 21-year-old said.

Rowdy Gregory, 55, goes to Gumby's to play pool and eat pizza — topped with garlic, spinach and steak.

"It's just a great place to be," Gregory said. "Everybody loves Gumby's."

Hippler and O'Brien plan to continue expanding the franchise beyond college towns, and they hope to have 100 franchises in the next five years.

"We change and learn every day," O'Brien said. "We learn something new and we learn from our mistakes."

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