



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Cliff Vasquez, general manager of Cheezer's Gourmet Pizza in Greenfield, prepares to put a pie in the oven.

# Cheezer's chain a family affair

*Locally owned restaurants grow with the valley*

By **ROBERT SALONGA**  
The Salinas Californian

The "family affair" of Cheezer's Gourmet Pizza, the south Monterey County restaurant chain, actually involves two families: the Khalagi family, which owns the chain, and a surrogate family formed between the owner and a hard-working employee.

The Cheezer story began in the early 1990s, when Ali Khalagi, disappointed with the performance of his Mountain

## **CHEEZER'S GOURMET PIZZA**

n **BUSINESS:** Pizzeria and restaurant.

n **ESTABLISHED:** 1991

n **EMPLOYEES:** 50 in south Monterey County.

n **ORGANIZATION:** Family-held, private corporation.

n **LOCATIONS:** 670 Walnut Ave., Greenfield (674-5900); 232 Broadway, King City (385-4914); and 235 West St., Soledad (678-8000).

n **INFORMATION:** 674-5900.

Mike's Pizza franchise in King City, decided to transform the shop into something of his own.

After the restaurant's new version took off in King City, Khalagi expanded Cheezer's to two other south county cities — Greenfield and Soledad — and the Sacramento area.

But a 12-year-old who'd convinced Khalagi to let him mop floors at the original King City restaurant when it was still Mountain Mike's Pizza had grown along with the franchise.

Cliff Vasquez, 31, went from weekend cleaning help to passing out coupons, and then training in concocting pizzas.

"As soon as I reached legal age to work in the kitchen, I was making pizzas and dough," Vasquez said.

He now runs the chain's south county operation as the

Khalagis' general manager. His transition into adulthood as part of the Cheezer's franchise made Vasquez's relationship with the family about much more than business.

"We feel like Cliff is my son," said Khalagi. "He is a very fine gentleman, a good worker, a nice man."

Vasquez returned the sentiment, hoping that growing up under Khalagi's tutelage will serve him in the future.

"I started at such a young age, my boss is more like a father figure to me," Vasquez said. "I hope to follow in his footsteps someday and go out on my own."

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