

The venture, slated for a “late summer or early fall 2026” debut, will operate primarily as a takeout and delivery concept. Meenk intends to keep his day job while overseeing the build-out and menu development, a juggling act he says reflects his “passion for both patient care and perfect crusts.”

*“I’ve been perfecting dough in my home kitchen for years, and the pandemic showed me how much people value good food at the curb,” Meenk told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel during a walkthrough of the half-finished space. “This isn’t just a side gig; it’s a chance to bring authentic New-York pizza to the West Side while still serving the community as a respiratory therapist.”*

## **From Hospital Hallways to Pizza Peel**

Meenk’s transition comes amid a broader trend of healthcare professionals launching food-related side businesses. According to a 2024 survey by the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center, 23 % of clinicians have started or are planning a culinary-focused venture, citing flexible hours and a desire for creative outlets.

The 1,200-square-foot shop on Burleigh Street—currently a former convenience-store space—will feature a 16-inch pizza oven, a refrigerated dough-proofing room, and a compact counter for quick pickup. Plans call for a cold-fermentation process that slows dough development for 48-72 hours, resulting in a “chewy, buttery crumb” that Meenk says rivals the pizza slices he enjoyed on trips to Manhattan.

*“Cold fermentation is how the pros do it in New York,” said Chef Marco Lombardi, a veteran pizzaiolo who consulted on the menu. “If Stephen can maintain that consistency in a 50-seat operation, he’ll stand out in Milwaukee’s crowded pizza scene.”*

## **Local Reception**

Neighbors and nearby businesses expressed optimism. Maria and Carlos Ramirez, owners of a family-run taco stand two doors down, said the pizza shop could boost foot traffic.

“We get a lot of delivery drivers anyway, and an extra pizza spot could keep people on the block longer,” Ramirez noted.

The West Side Business Association also welcomed the addition, noting that the neighborhood has seen a surge in culinary startups over the past three years.

“Meenk Bros Pizza will add to the diversity of food options while creating jobs,” said association president Lena Thompson. “We’re happy to see a local who’s investing back into the community.”

## **Funding and Timeline**

The project is financed through a combination of personal savings, a small business loan from MKE Capital, and a \$15,000 grant from the city’s “Creative Commerce” program, which supports entrepreneurs transitioning from traditional employment to the food-service sector.

Construction began in early March 2025. With interior framing completed, the next milestones include installing the pizza oven (expected July 2025), finalizing the menu (September 2025), and obtaining a food-service license (January 2026). Meenk anticipates a soft opening in August 2026, followed by a full launch in early September.

## **Balancing Two Worlds**

For Meenk, the dual role presents logistical challenges. He works rotating 12-hour shifts at St. Luke's, then heads to Burleigh Street for evenings and weekends to oversee dough preparation and vendor deliveries.

"There are nights I'm on call at the hospital, but I've set up a schedule that lets me keep the kitchen running while I'm away," he explained. "My team—my wife, a part-time cook, and a delivery driver—are all crucial."

Meenk also plans to incorporate a charitable component: a percentage of weekly sales will be donated to the American Lung Association's local chapter, reflecting his medical background.

## **Looking Ahead**

If the timing aligns, Meenk Bros Pizza Co. could debut just as Milwaukee's outdoor dining season ramps up, potentially capitalizing on the city's growing appetite for authentic regional pizza.

"Spring is when people start thinking about pizza on the patio," noted City Planner Diane Greene of the Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services. "A November opening would be perfect, but an August rollout gives them a strong summer foothold."

As the project progresses, the community will watch closely to see whether Stephen Meenk can successfully slice his way from hospital corridors to the bustling streets of West Milwaukee—one cold-fermented crust at a time.