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MAY 2006

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Gourmet

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**PLUS: BUILD A BACKYARD OVEN
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IF YOU BUILD IT...

IN THEIR QUEST FOR THE CRISPEST CRUST AND TENDEREST MEAT, THREE GRILLERS FOLLOW THEIR DREAM AND CONSTRUCT **AN OUTDOOR OVEN** BY DAVID SHENK

WANT TO BAKE A TRULY OUTSTANDING LOAF of pumpernickel bread from scratch? Here are some tips you may not have come across: After you've mixed 11 parts castable refractory cement with 1 part water (in a revolving 30-gallon drum), and you've poured the gray sludge into a mold that contains an armature assembled from $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch steel bars cut with a chop saw (sparks will fly; wear protective goggles) and welded together (wear helmet; pay out weld in concentric circles), try pressing a hammer drill against the outside wall to create a powerful vibration so that the cement will spread evenly.

That's if you first need to build your own wood-fired bread oven, which last year began to feel like an overdue home necessity to San Francisco gourmands Nikolas Weinstein, Christian Dauer, and Jon Shenk. Tired of doughy, lifeless pizza crust and bread with no taste or lift, this trio of food enthusiasts challenged themselves to design and build (from the ground up) a personal backyard food furnace—complete with adjustable grill, slow-cooking rotisserie, and cozy brick oven on top. Oak would provide plenty of smoke, which would be guided by a movable damper, and heat, which would be carefully gauged by two embedded thermometers.

This extraordinary home-cooking apparatus, if they could actually pull it off, would leave Alice Waters herself pea-shoot green with envy.

"Whoa—that's a little too much power. You hear it starting to pop?" That's Weinstein, an internationally known glass artist with his own vast crafts studio in the Mission district, teaching documentary filmmaker Shenk (my brother) how to weld industrial-weight wheels onto the bottom of a heavy steel frame, the just-built skeleton of their massive work-in-progress. Shaping the perfect new firebox, it turns out, requires a fountain of creativity, plenty of field-testing (burning stuff in a parking lot), and much precision engineering; for many months, the idealists have been building models, measuring heat and ventilation, and manipulating versions of the design with PowerCADD software. Kiln-builders in Seattle and clockmakers in Italy have been consulted, literally tons of bricks and steel ordered. Now comes the first full-size prototype, which will take weeks to build.

Off in the far corner, Dauer—an architect with his own

Wood-fired grandeur: Steaks on the grill, chickens on the rotisserie. To heat the upper oven to 800°F, just close the lower set of doors.

small firm—is wrapped in goggles and a large shop apron. He is using a water-lubricated block saw to angle more than 200 sand-colored refractory bricks to form the oven's top dome. Conventional home ovens, as true pizza buffs know all too well, reach a mere 500 degrees Fahrenheit, which, even with a preheated stone, cannot give nearly enough crispness to the crust. This small brick oven, just large enough for a 16-inch pizza, will easily reach (and retain) the 800 degrees prized by many pizza professionals.

NOW THAT THEY'VE CREATED A FIRST-CLASS COOKING TOOL, THEY'LL HAVE NO EXCUSE IF THE FOOD AIN'T GREAT. TIME TO GIVE IT THE ONLY TEST THAT MATTERS.

Bread, of course, is a different matter. A well-baked loaf requires not extreme temperature but extreme consistency—a thick, resilient oven with such a deep thermal reservoir that open doors and lukewarm dough won't force any significant temperature drop. The refractory bricks being used here will absorb heat reasonably quickly and evenly, then radiate it with ferocity. Temperature accuracy is also important, of course, which is why the crew is building one thermometer into the oven floor and suspending another in the oven's air space. Both will be threaded to pyrometers, or gauges, on the oven's

outer wall. "You load your bread dough," explains Weinstein, "when the temperatures in the air and on the floor have stabilized." As I stare right now at a bare steel frame and a haphazard pile of bricks on a forklift, it requires a fair amount of imagination to visualize all this.

"We're going to mortar these metal seams—right?"

"I wasn't planning on it. I thought we were going to keep them as tight as possible."

In the studio, assorted technical matters are addressed between bursts from the welding gun and the brick saw. The plaintive, postapocalyptic band Granddaddy wafts down from the rafters, interlacing with the sounds of dripping water and the whine from the pneumatic die-grinder. The smell of burnt metal hovers in the air, along with that of espresso, oil from the lathe, and sweet garlic from a lunch of chicken and baba ghanouj. Weinstein has spent hours on his lathe, machining the rod ends that will effortlessly raise and lower the grill, depending on how much heat is desired. "I'm going to be deeply embarrassed if this doesn't work," he announces to no one in particular.

HE KNOWS IT WON'T, OF COURSE—not right away, and that's part of what this project is all about. Mistakes are not only inevitable; they are an integral part of the process. So much of life in 21st-century America is defined by shortcuts and conveniences. Even those of us who bother to cook are, for the most part, strictly end users, instruction followers, relying on finely calibrated machines to perform

... YOU'LL WANT TO KNOW HOW TO USE IT

The first time La Brea Bakery's Nancy Silverton cooked in the outdoor oven at her rustic home in Umbria, Italy, she almost set the place on fire. When she bought the property, back in 2002, the front-porch brick oven was a romantic selling point: According to the locals, it had been used for communal baking in the early 1900s. But the British couple who had previously owned the villa had so little use for the old-timey appliance that they'd let their cat sprint around the inside and built a loft apartment right on top of it. Silverton decided it was time to take the oven back.

And so, after a friend and fellow vacationer had tossed the pickets of a sagging grape-stick fence and some dry twigs into the oven chamber and watched the internal temperature climb, Nancy began briskly slipping dessert-plate-size pizzas in and out of the oven. Production came to a screeching halt when somebody noticed that at the highest point of the oven's roof, flames were dancing from several exposed wooden beams. The blaze was quickly extinguished, but not before it toasted the bottom of the loft-apartment mattress like a slow-cooked marshmallow.

The fright was enough to make Silverton invest in proper insulation between the loft and the oven and, eventually, to purchase a smaller, single-family-size unit to be installed directly inside the old cavern. I share this story not because of what can be learned from how she successfully retrofitted the outdoor oven, but because of how the near disaster taught Silverton just how much she *didn't* know about this elemental arm of the culinary arts.

Which is why, a few months ago, after purchasing (with Mario Batali) a restaurant in which she intends to serve wood-fired-oven pizzas, Silverton enrolled in the San Francisco Baking Institute's first-ever wood-fired-oven baking workshop. Started by French-born baker and bakery designer Michel Suas for backyard dabblers and professionals who wonder why their fare bears so little resemblance to that of such brick-oven wizards as New York City's Frank DeCarlo (of Peasant) and L.A.'s Nicola Mastronardi (of Vincenti Ristorante), the workshop covers everything from the history of the oven to baking baguettes and tarts. Still, emerging from the intensive seminar five

days later, Silverton didn't claim to be any kind of expert. "When it comes to something like cooking with fire, what I've learned is that there are so many variables—the size of the oven, the retention of the heat, the kind of wood you're burning—I'm just going to have to learn to work with the idiosyncrasies. If nothing else, though, the class gave me the confidence to know that this is the kind of thing you learn from experience." (www.sfbaking.com; \$980 for the five-day workshop, including daily lunch)

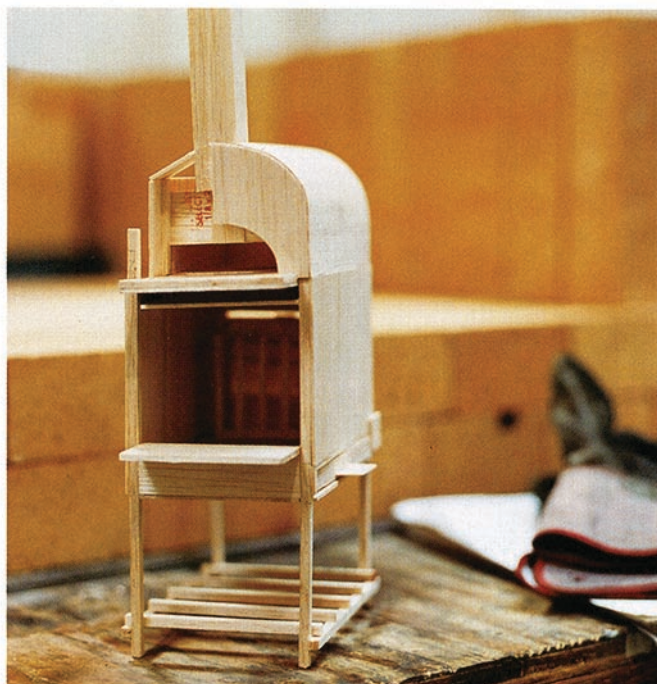
AN OVEN OF YOUR OWN

Interested in firing up a few pizzas in your own kitchen or backyard? These retailers can provide either fully built wood-burning ovens or the materials you'll need to build your own. Some also offer wood-fired-oven cooking classes.

EarthStone Ovens, Glendale, CA; 800-840-4915; earthstoneovens.com.

Wildwood Ovens & BBQs, Los Angeles; 800-579-2797; wildwoodovens.com.

Maine Wood Heat Co., Inc., Norridgewock, ME; 207-696-5442; mainewoodheat.com. —Margo Rochlin



Like the earliest hominids, these food geeks are huddled around some tools, figuring out how to control fire. First, they think small, with a balsa model. Then, Nikolas Weinstein spot-welds an oven wall into place, Christian Dauer lays bricks, and Jon Shenk makes a protopizza.

difficult, time-consuming chores for us. We turn a comfortable knob to start a carefully controlled fire, push a button to conjure a cup of coffee, press a small lever to attain precise slices. There is nothing wrong, of course, with using masterful tools. But without a knowledge of these tools' construction or function, today's chef or consumer slips further and further away from a real emotional connection with the food he or she is cooking.

After a string of long weekends and some medium-level family neglect, the prototype finally takes shape. The bricks are laid, the gear system perfected, the vertical fire cage for the rotisserie in place. It's time to give it the only test that

matters. Onto the fire goes the herb-crusted pork loin; into the oven goes the *pizza alla napoletana*, the San Francisco sourdough, and the pear galette with cornmeal crust. Weinstein, Dauer, and Shenk are typical Bay Area residents in that they demand freshness and high quality in everything from burritos to saltimbocca. Now that they've created a first-class cooking tool, they'll have no excuse if the food ain't great.

Fortunately, the food tastes as good as the fire feels and smells. Enjoying a smoky, oaky feast of deliciousness, the trio are overwhelmed with bubbling crusts, crackling skin, and tender, flavorful meat. But in between bites, the tinkering continues—after all, this is just the prototype. 