

Kitchens With All the Toppings

Wood-burning Ovens For People Who Really Like Their Pizza



Photograph by Ken Wyner

By Cheryl Kenny

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A blast of super-heated air, a quick blistering of dough, and the first pizza Amy Gerson baked in her new wood-burning oven was toast.

“We did not anticipate that it would take only a minute to bake a pizza,” said Gerson, who put a wood-burning oven in the outdoor kitchen of her Great Falls home several years ago. “At the beginning, we had a few ‘nuclear’ pizzas. We had some good laughs until we became more adept.”

Some homeowners — with a commitment to cooking and a willingness to invest both time and money in it — are equipping their homes, indoors and out, with smaller versions of the wood-burning ovens found in restaurants offering authenticity and ambience as well as pizza.

Sales of residential ovens by Mugnaini Imports (www.mugnaini.com) have doubled in the past year in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Earth Stone Wood-Fire Ovens (www.earthstoneovens.com), another major retailer, has seen U.S. residential sales rise at least 30 percent for each of the past several years. Both companies report having dozens of customers in the Washington area, even though the ovens can cost more than \$10,000.

Although widely thought of as pizza ovens, wood-fired ovens are actually used for a variety of roasted, grilled and baked dishes. Ellen and Anthony Zelano discovered the oven’s versatility after making a Mugnaini oven the centerpiece of their Fairfax kitchen when they remodeled in 2003. Soups, roasted vegetables, and seared, succulent meats are among the delicacies now emerging from their two-ton oven. “For me, the most fun is experimenting,” said Ellen Zelano, adding that the first holiday turkey roasted in the oven was the best she ever made.

Even so, Zelano says the true motivation for a last-minute decision to add a wood-fired oven to her kitchen renovation was the allure of oven-crisp pizza. “We’d go to Pizzeria Paradiso downtown and we’d think, ‘This pizza is so fantastic, wouldn’t it be wonderful to have one of those [ovens],’ “ said Ellen, a painter and teacher at the Corcoran College of Art and Design.

Anthony Zelano, an attorney, had his doubts. For one thing, he was concerned about the start-up time required — about two hours — to heat the oven enough to bake pizza. “I said, ‘No way, forget it, we’ll never use it,’ “ he said. “The next thing I knew, she’d ordered it.”

The couple’s architect was taken aback by the 11th-hour change, says Ellen: “The architect says, ‘You tell me to design a kitchen. I work on it for six months . . . and then right at the end you tell me you want to put something the size of a Volkswagen in it!’ “

John Schmitt is vice president of **Kingston Custom Builders** (www.kingstonbuilders.com), in Fairfax Station, which built the Zelanos’ kitchen addition. Schmitt personally moved the pre-assembled unit from a truck to the kitchen site with a forklift, taking out a lamppost in the process. “Installation was not highly unusual,” he said. “The primary challenge was getting it in there.”

Kitchen floor joists were reinforced to bear the weight (4,000 pounds), and Schmitt worked with an HVAC contractor to ensure the ventilation system would accommodate heat generated by the oven.

The ovens, which typically resemble a raised fireplace with a smaller, dome-shaped opening and a firebrick or tile hearth floor, allow cooking at much higher temperatures than conventional ovens — up to 1,200 degrees or more.

“The goal is to saturate the dome and floor with heat, and establish a bed of red-hot coals by burning the wood down to coals,” said John Thess, general manager of California-based Mugnaini. “We regulate the oven temperature by how much flame there is.”

“It is the ultimate in primitive cookware,” says Ed McGushin, a semi-retired consultant who included a wood-burning oven in his 900 -square-foot kitchen when he built his home in The Plains in 1998. “You light a fire with wood, get it good and hot, push

[the logs] to the side, then cook on the [oven] floor.” He especially likes the “nice charred effect” of roasting poultry in the oven.

EarthStone owner Maurice Sabbagh Yotnegparian said that despite extreme interior temperatures, the heat given off by a well-insulated, medium-sized model — which should come through only the oven opening — is comparable to that given off through the sides, back and door of conventional high-powered ovens such as a Wolf or a Viking. The Zelanos and McGushin say heat has not been an issue in their large kitchens, even in summer.

Once homeowners figure out if they can fit a wood-burning oven into their space and ventilate it, they should check local building codes. “In the U.S., jurisdictional authorities have yet to establish an independent category for these ovens... There may be a question of what the oven is,” said Thess of Mugnaini. For code purposes, the ovens are often treated as if they were fireplaces.



Courtesy Photograph

But just the wood-burning oven costs about \$3,000 to \$10,000, depending partly on size. Installation and exterior finishes, such as brick, stucco or natural stone, are extra fees and could double the cost. The Zelanos, who finished their oven exterior with soapstone, spent about \$10,000 to \$12,000.

Using the oven takes practice, but it is not that complicated. Starting the fire, however, can be something of a work of art. “I put all of my sticks in a shopping bag, shove the whole bag in, and light it on fire,” said Ellen Zelano.

Clean-up is simple. After the oven is cool — as much as a full day after use — ashes can be swept into a fire-proof container and the hearth floor wiped with a damp rag. About 75 percent of Mugnaini’s residential sales are for outdoor ovens. At EarthStone, nearly 50 percent of its East Coast sales are for ovens used outside. Outdoor ovens account for 85 percent on the West Coast, where weather allows year-round outside entertaining.

Bill Smithers is owner of University Builders, which built Ed McGushin’s home, and chairman of the Northern Virginia Custom Builders Council. He says the growing popularity of outdoor ovens may be heading east: “Outside cooking places are a trend. It’s no longer just what’s inside the walls that’s important.”

Gerson, a small business owner whose home is the cover story of the January/February 2005 issue of Southern Accents Magazine, would agree. Her outdoor kitchen includes a Viking range, refrigerator, warming drawer and running water, in addition to the wood-burning oven. “We have kids and we entertain a lot,” she said. “The oven lends personality to the outdoor kitchen.”

EarthStone and Mugnaini offer customers cooking classes at their California showrooms. Mugnaini includes QuickTime videos on its website, and annually sponsors a tour of Tuscany for hands-on cooking lessons, offered exclusively to customers.

Jerry Lopez, a graduate of L’Academie de Cuisine in Bethesda and former pastry chef at Ashburn’s Belmont Country Club, offers cooking classes on a Mugnaini wood-fired oven in the outdoor kitchen of his Loudoun County home (www.artoffinecooking.com). “It’s a very diverse piece of equipment,” said Lopez, noting his classes cover everything from roasting and grilling to baking pizzas.



Photograph by Ken Wyner

Cuisine aside, oven owners say bringing friends and family around the fire is what makes the ovens so special. “The oven is a gathering place,” said Gerson. “My husband enjoys making the dough. We parade out a lot of condiments, and everyone makes their own pizza. It brings out a creativity that is so unexpected.”

Kingston Custom Builders is an award-winning Design-Build contractor, holding a ‘Class A’ contractors license in Virginia, and licenses in Maryland, and the District as well.

The Zelano’s kitchen, featured in this article, later won the Grand award for kitchens in its class, at NARI’s annual ‘Contractor of the Year Awards’ held in Washington DC.