



A Little Slice of Italy Right from Your Backyard

By Meg Barone

More Fairfield County residents are incorporating custom-built pizza ovens into their backyard patios, as the residents of this New Canaan property did.

The origin of pizza is often disputed. Some claim it is a product of Italy while others are convinced the first tomato and cheese pies originated in the United States. (It really is Italy.) Also highly contested is where connoisseurs can find the best pizza. Is it Wooster Street in New Haven, Little Italy or Brooklyn in New York, or the deep-dish variety in Chicago?

The advent of pizza ovens in residential kitchens and in backyards will add another layer of argument to the mix. Which neighbor on a particular block makes the best pizza? A growing number of people are having pizza ovens installed in their homes or in their yards, and with it comes pizza parties and competitions over whose pie tastes best and who can come up with the most unusual toppings.

Mike and Ami Kutsch have used the brick beehive oven in a fireplace of their Fairfield home for pizza parties. "It might be easier to cook in the regular kitchen oven but (making pizza in the beehive oven) is fun, it's more exciting. You're not going to gather around an oven to talk. It's a conversation piece. It becomes an event," Mike Kutsch said.

In the Kutsch household they lay



The owners of a home in Fairfield's Greenfield Hill enjoy hosting pizza parties using their own pizza oven in the kitchen.

out a wide variety of ingredients and let people "build" their own pizzas. "It becomes a competition to see who can create the best pizza," he said.

"This becomes a wonderful way to entertain and have everyone involved in the process" said Brian MacDonald, president of Davenport Contracting

in Stamford, whose company gets occasional requests for indoor pizza ovens. Davenport Contracting recently built an interior pizza oven with counter space on either side of the opening and a pull-out marble counter that allows more work surface and room for the long pizza paddle.

They basically serve as a "social gathering point" although such ovens can also provide heat and ambiance. But MacDonald said pizza ovens require a bit of planning and are not suited to the casual kitchen renovation. If a homeowner is overhauling their kitchen a pizza oven can be incorporated into the design. It requires a three, four or five-foot diameter and the cavity must be surrounded by a sufficient amount of fire proofing. There must also be room for the chimney mass.

The design creates a dome that retains the heat while the smoke goes up the flue. "The key is to make sure you're creating a safe environment with proper ventilation, air flow in and out. It's a little more complicated than a fireplace," MacDonald said. An improper design can create the potential risk for backdrafts or for a fair amount of heat and air to go up the chimney.

Outdoor pizza ovens are increasingly popular as people spend more time outside and have extended their living spaces into their backyards. There are free-standing pizza ovens while some people build such an element right into their outdoor kitchen and grilling areas. The ovens can be brick, clay, metal or stone. Some are wood-fired, some use pellets, and some are fueled by natural gas.

Haynes Materials and Haynes Outdoor Living Furniture Showrooms in Seymour and Deep River sell several types of wood-fired outdoor pizza ovens. Dan Barnes, of Haynes, said some of them come from Italy and Haynes also makes pre-fabricated units that are

produced in Seymour. The units are delivered to a customer's property fully finished.

The company also rents pizza ovens for special occasions, Barnes said, because not everyone has the location in their yard to accommodate a pizza oven or the money to have one built. They can be pricey, he said. According to online sources pizza ovens can range from the modest NutriChef Electric Pizza Pit Oven/Pizza Maker Stove for \$113.51 to the Bakers Pride Y-802BL Super Deck Y Series Liquid Propane Brick Lined Double Deck Pizza Oven 66" for \$28,586. And those are free-standing units. Having one custom built will likely come with a larger price tag.

Barnes recommends doing some homework before investing in a pizza oven. "It's not something that you're just going to throw in a fire. There's prep time involved," he said. The "floor" of the pizza oven must reach a temperature of at least 600 degrees to keep the dough from sticking, he said. Most ovens reach about 800 degrees.

Once it's up to temperature, Barnes said it only takes one minute to cook a pizza, and the ovens are not limited to that one type of food. People have cooked steaks and baked pies in them.

For those who prefer to rent than purchase, Barnes said Haynes rents for a day, a weekend, a week. "We deliver it and fill it up with enough wood to support your party." The rental also includes all the utensils, among them the pizza "peel" or paddle. He recommends reserving a pizza oven at least one week before the event.

On the Haynes website - www.gohaynes.com/pizzaovens - there is a video of Barnes explaining all the ins and outs of making pizza."

Meg Barone is a freelance writer for the Hearst Connecticut Media Group.



Builder Brian MacDonald, of Davenport Contracting in Stamford, who gets occasional requests for indoor pizza ovens, says they serve as a "social gathering point." Courtesy of Davenport Contracting.