

COOKING *with* FIRE

Baking and cooking in an outdoor oven carries a certain romance — old fashioned, old country, all natural — that you just can't get with a conventional oven. Think 900°F temperatures that can bake a pizza to perfection — thin crisp crust, bubbling cheese, almost caramelized toppings, with a hint of smoke — in less than three minutes.

By Carolyn Camilleri



Opposite page:
This 36" Mugnaini
wood-fired
pizza oven from
David Johnstone
Masonry and
Design was built
with Montana
sandstone, with
stones from the
local site in the
decorative arch
detail over the
oven opening.



Building an outdoor wood-fired oven at home is part of a growing trend toward doing things in the old way, the way our ancestors did, taking time and care with the food we eat, paying attention to ingredients, and recognizing that instant and economical isn't always best.

It's also gaining popularity thanks to certain culinary stars.

"I think a lot of it has to do with the *Food Network* and people like Jamie Oliver," says David Johnstone, of David Johnstone Masonry and Design in Nanaimo. "People see him cooking with his oven and I think this is fuelling it somewhat. There's a whole movement towards this — there are a lot of foodies."

Johnstone also attributes the outdoor-oven trend to the growing number of restaurants and bakeries using wood-fired ovens.

"The more people who are exposed to [wood-fired ovens], and they get to experience the great food that comes out of them, and the atmosphere that they create — it exponentially grows."

Johnstone has built ovens for a number of Island businesses and many homeowners, including some in Victoria. "There is a great deal of interest in it," he says. "It seems like weekly I am talking to people about them."

The outdoor ovens fit well with another trend, this one in home design. Mike de Palma of Flintstones Masonry and Newcastle Stoneworks says the outdoor ovens they have built have all been part of larger, outdoor living projects, with the oven being one of several elements.

"We really haven't had any jobs where someone has said 'I just want a pizza oven and that's it,'" says de Palma. "They will want a hot tub, a pool, a pizza oven, and we



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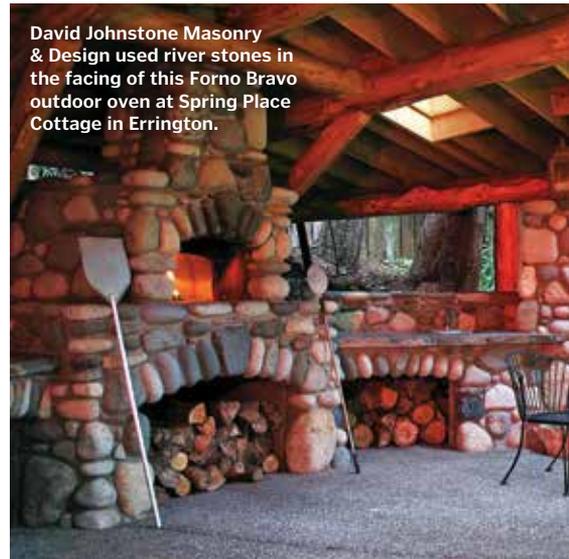
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David Johnstone Masonry & Design used river stones in the facing of this Forno Bravo outdoor oven at Spring Place Cottage in Errington.



fit it in and build the whole design.”

Johnstone has built ovens as part of a larger plan for an outdoor space, as well as for people working them into existing designs. “The sky is the limit.”

THE BASIC REQUIREMENTS

As with building any wood-burning fireplace, there are regulations — and where you live makes a difference.

“There is a standard building code where you have to have an airspace between it and anything that is combustible,” he says. “But with some outdoor wood-burning units, it depends on the municipalities. Some municipalities have no problem with them, but other municipalities don’t want anything outdoors that’s wood burning.”

The key message? Always check first! You also need to decide whether to build from scratch or from a kit. Building from scratch is more labour intensive and, thus, more costly. Flintstones and David Johnstone do both, but there are advantages to kits, other than price.

“The heating-up time: with some of the wood-burning ones, a personal-size oven, it’s going to take about 30 to 45 minutes,” says de Palma. “The kits will warm up faster than [ovens] built from scratch. In general, the kits are better because of the manufacturing and the engineering that they put into it. They are high-quality kits.”

HOW BIG?

“You could put a number of different sizes into a residential situation, say a 30-inch to a 42- or a 48-inch,” says Johnstone. “The bigger the oven, the more space you need.

PORTABLE OVENS

If you want a pizza oven but don’t want to make it a permanent structure, portable models with metal stands are available through David Masonry and Design and Capital Iron.

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ACCESSORIES

Infrared thermometer An important tool, says David Johnstone. "It has a laser marker on it, so wherever it hits the surface of the oven, it gives you a reading."

Peel A long-handled paddle for putting food into the hot oven.



Turning peel A long-handled stainless steel tool with a round edge on it so you can turn the food as it cooks.

Long, heat-resistant **leather gloves**.

Cast iron or terracotta cookware.



Cast iron Oval French Oven from Le Creuset

You are dealing with a certain amount of mass that you are building for the heat retention. Then you are insulating that with a ceramic blanket. So the footprint could be five feet by five feet."

All that mass needs a proper foundation — and it also needs a roof to keep them dry, says Johnstone. And shelter means you can use your outdoor oven year round!

FIRE IT UP

While restaurants often use gas for convenience, for homeowners, Johnstone prefers wood. "The heat retention capacity is amazing. You can get the ovens hotter with wood than you can with gas."

It takes less time to heat up than you might think. "For a 36-inch oven, typically, depending on the type of wood you are burning, in 45 minutes to one hour and 10 minutes, you are going to be at around the 800 to 1,000 degree mark," says Johnstone.

But you don't have to wait for full heat. "After about 20 minutes, I am sautéing stuff in a cast-iron pan on the oven floor — say if I want to caramelize some onions."

Johnstone does a lot of outdoor cooking and, twice a year, works with Martin Barnett facilitating a workshop on outdoor cooking at Vancouver Island University. Johnstone's favourite is pizza, but he cooks much more than pizza. "I did my whole Christmas dinner and Thanksgiving dinner in the oven. I'll use alder, which has a really nice smoky taste to it, and the gravy and the meat will pick up a nice little hint of the smoke. It's really great."

Another cooking tip: make the most of the incredible heat retention. Johnstone cooks the pizza first. Then, when it has cooled a bit, he bakes apple or berry crisp and, later, pulled pork, which he lets cook through the night.

Great food at home — and that is what having an outdoor oven is all about! ::

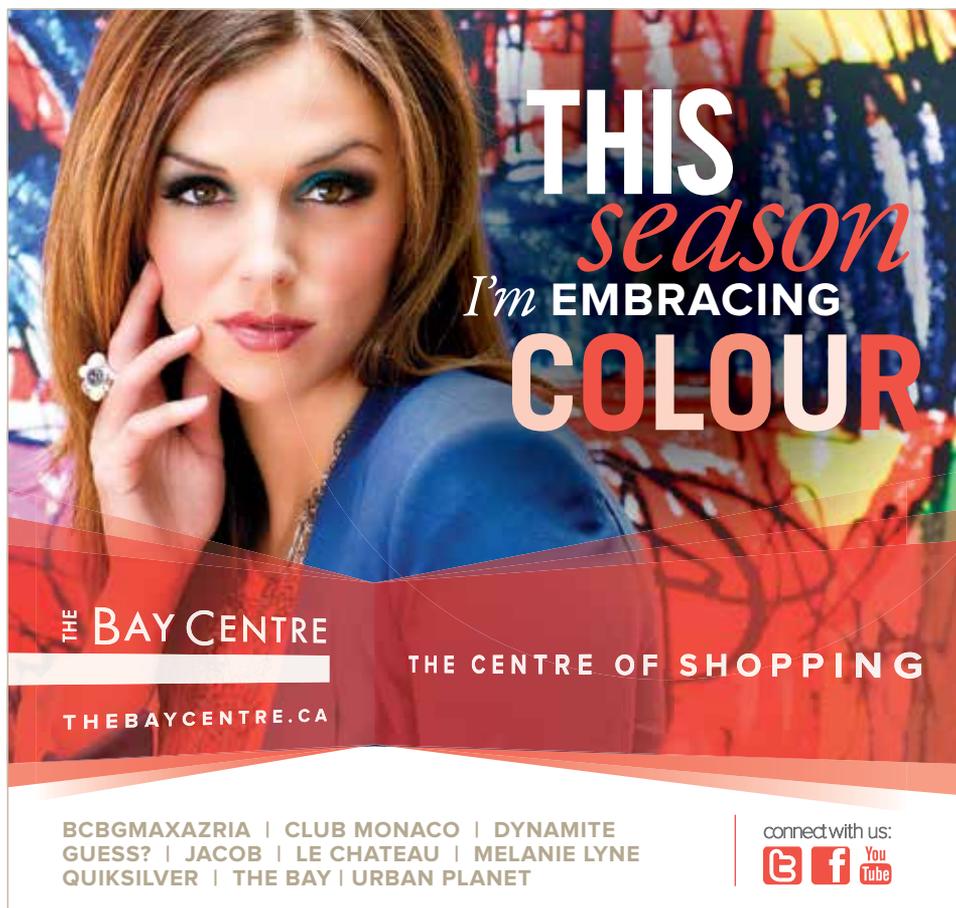


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