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**“FIRED UP:
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Fired up and ready to roll...the dough, that is

Exceptional ovens add flavor and warmth to pizzas, bread and more at Kennebunk eateries

By Faith Gillman, Staff writer

Wood fired brick ovens and captured heat cooking are certainly not modern inventions. Remnants of brick ovens have been discovered in the excavations of many ancient civilizations, with such ovens reaching the modern form in ancient Rome, according to Forno Bravo, a wood and gas-fired oven manufacturer.

Based in California, the company uses classic Italian techniques in the construction of their ovens, something German Lucarelli, chef and owner at Ports of Italy in Kennebunk can attest to.

“Our model is called Napoli because it is made like in Napoli, Italy,” said Lu-

carelli of the bright red and black striped wood-fired oven that graces the front of the restaurant. “It has seven layers of insulation which preserve the fire very well and most important it spreads the heat equal all over it. It is designed to have the right temperature on the floor and higher on the dome.”

The oven at Ports of Italy weighs approximately 3,800 pounds and was shipped cross-country from Forno Bravo’s plant in California. Getting it into the restaurant was not an easy task.

“It was expensive adding the special requirements to bring it inside,” said Lucarelli. “Imagine, we had to rent a forklift and then it took three workers two days to bring it inside and put it in place.”

Lucarelli said it was important to him to go with a brick oven for pizza.

“I love the thin crust pizza with the right amount of ingredients. It’s all about having a well-educated palette. Real Italian pizza

is well-known for the crispiness and flavor, and basically best ingredients need to be used for it,” he said. “American Italian pizza, or called pies are a totally different song, nothing is similar, from the sauce, dough, to the oven and toppings.”

Ports of Italy is not the only local business that has chosen to install an oven constructed based on methods established centuries ago.

Boulangerie, Kennebunk’s ‘proper bakery,’ houses an oven fabricated with a focus on consistency, an important quality in the making of bread and pastries. Designed in part by Bill Lawson at Empire Baking Equipment in New Jersey, Lawson contacted the Italian firm of Logiudice Forni to build the oven, which has been affectionately nicknamed ‘Jolene’ by Boulangerie owners Amy and Zachary Tyson.

“Logiudice Forni have been building ovens for hundreds of years,” said Amy Tyson. “The oven was shipped in many



The tile covered wood-fired oven at Ports of Italy weighs nearly 4,000 pounds and took several days to install, according to chef and owner German Lucarelli.

Photo by Robert Dennis

boxes and crates from Italy and assembled in the bakery over a period of five days with the help of Bill Lawson, his assistant, and Zachary. There is the equivalent of 20 batons of blown volcanic insulation wrapping the decks of the oven. This is an incredibly insulating and heat resistant material that is made by shooting molten pumice stone through nozzles to create a wool-like material.”

While the technology of the oven may be relatively simple, it is built to high specifications. The use of steam tubes in its construction make all the difference.

“The oven is a boiler attached to hermetically sealed steam tubes that run around all the decks, bottom top and back,” said Tyson. “This super-heated steam allows the oven to maintain a constant, even temperature without hot or cold spots on the deck.”

The boiler, which is fueled by propane, allows for the creation of steam to inject on the decks, which is “incredibly important in creating the beautifully caramelized crust we get on our hearth breads,” said Tyson. “Without this steam, the bread would look chalky.”

The ability to keep the oven at a constant

temperature throughout is important for efficiency and even baking. Although conventional electric ovens heat up faster and there is not a concern about their venting, they can be very expensive to operate. And they “just don't seem to produce the best product,” according to Tyson.



The brick oven at Owen's Farmhouse is kept at a toasty 700 to 750 degrees with a mix of hard and soft wood.

Photo courtesy of Owen's Farmhouse

The location and production demand at the bakery limited the Tyson's choices but they are happy with their decision.

“We have a very efficient, compact oven with clean, simple technology and great air flow thanks to Haley's Metal Shop,” said Tyson. “They worked with us intensely on the venting of the oven.”

Learning to use the oven was an interesting experience for the couple.

“Bill gave us some instruction as we were building. He advised Zachary to crack the stone decks,” said Tyson. “Zachary was quite reluctant to break them and it took some convincing, but apparently, it is best to crack the stone decks slightly when installing them so they can expand without buckling. And our decks have been great.”

After the oven was set in place, The Tyson's spent a few weeks before the bakery opened getting to know 'Jolene.'

“She is fiery, and we still get burned sometimes, but she's a good girl and works hard for us,” said Tyson. “The oven pretty much runs 24 hours. We turn her off for a couple of hours after the bake just to cool the kitchen a little, but the heat retention is great, and at the end of the day, when we

turn the oven on again for the morning bake, it is rarely under 300 degrees.”

David Ross, owner/chef of 50 Local and Owen's Farmhouse did his homework before deciding on the oven that would work best for Owen's, which has an extensive menu of wood-fired pizzas.

“When doing research, looking at all the custom-built oven cores all over the country, I took a liking to Maine Wood Heat Company,” said Ross. “And not just because they are a Maine company but because of the incredible quality. They offer a brand of wood fire oven cores—Le Panyol—which uses organic terra blanche French stone. The core construction made it easy to put together. We used George Burr, a local contractor to put it all together with the insulation and brick around it.”

Working with a wood-fired brick oven was something Ross had always wanted to do.

“It definitely brings an excitement to cooking and people love to work with it. I had used them in the past but never had one in-house,” he said. “I realized to make the pizza we wanted to make we would need a wood-fired oven.”

When Ross contacted Maine Wood Heat to ask about the oven he found out that there was one nearby in Lyman, at the Stone Turtle Baking School.

“The folks at Stone Turtle are a wealth of knowledge and my biggest resource. They consulted with me throughout the whole process, taught me so much about it and about efficient heating of the oven,” said Ross. “I learned not only how to keep the oven hot but about stretching pizza dough. I had an idea of what I wanted and implemented their standards into ours.”

Learning the ropes of managing a wood-fired oven came over time for Ross and his staff.

“We were so new three years ago. There was a lot of trial and error; lots of strikes—and gutters,” he said. “You have to have a real passion for it and a connection to it. If it’s too hot, you’ll burn the pizza. If there’s too much cornmeal underneath the texture is too gritty.”

“At first, we were burning a lot. It took time to figure it out. We have three people in the kitchen when we’re busy—one



Boulangerie co-owner Zachary Tyson, left, gets help placing deck stones into the bakery’s oven from Bill Lawson of Empire Baking Equipment. Before the stones went all the way in, Lawson and Tyson gave each one a little leveraged jolt to crack them.

Photo courtesy of Amy Tyson

to stretch dough, one to take care of the toppings and one person just working the oven.”

Both Ports of Italy and Owen’s Farmhouse burn locally-sourced wood in their respective ovens.



Amy Tyson, who along with husband Zachary owns and manages Boulangerie bakery in Kennebunk has nicknamed the bakery’s oven “Jolene.” The oven helps the Tysons to produce the bread and pastries Boulangerie has become known for.

Staff photo by Faith Gillman

“We’re always using different types of wood from a local supplier. It’s important to use dry, dry wood. It’s not kiln dried but it is very dry,” said Ross. “Different wood mixes allow us more control over the oven. Dense red oak burns longer but super

dry soft wood gets us quick BTU heat. We use white and red oak, birch, even pine. I like the oven at 700 to 750 degrees. The mix of wood helps with that.”

Ports of Italy uses hardwoods for their oven’s fire, mostly white oak. Austen Taylor is the pizza chef at the restaurant and has been working hard to learn the ins and outs of the oven.

“You are constantly in it, controlling it by moving wood around and the pizza on the deck. It’s challenging because there are so many things that can happen,” said Taylor. “Weather can even have an effect on the oven.”

Taylor likes to keep the oven’s deck at 750 degrees, which can be a formidable task when pizza orders begin to stack up.

“We were very busy for Prelude,” said Taylor. “We had a day in which we made more than 100 pizzas.”

How long a pizza takes in a wood-fired brick oven depends on how many pizzas are on deck. In the oven at Owen’s Farmhouse having 6 to 8 pizzas cooking at once will draw more heat so it will can take up



Ports of Italy's oven helps to keep the restaurant warm on cold winter days, as Taylor Austen, left and German Lucarelli can attest.

Photo by Robert Dennis

to two minutes.

"If there's just 1 or 2 in the oven it can be 30 seconds to a minute," said Ross. "When you're moving the pizza around

you know it's done when it sounds hollow. It puffs and crisps up really quickly and you get that great texture. It comes out really, really hot. It takes a bit to be able to eat it."

So just how is a pizza made in a wood fired oven different from one made in a conventional oven?

According to Ross, it's very simple: 700-degree heat.

"There's direct heat from the fire and coals. The dough hits that heat and the yeast puffs up really fast, allows for that crispness," he said. "The flavor of the wood fire is important too but it's getting the heat—that hot deck, the bottom of the oven super-hot to get that texture."

Lucarelli adds "The flavor of the burning...yum. And of course, the freshest Italian ingredients. We do use local white oak in our oven and the flavor and char on the pizza is amazing, there is nothing comparing it with a conventional oven, not even close."

Both Ross and Lucarelli think it is important to be able to offer wood-fired pizza to their customers.

"Maybe it's selfish but I like to feed people the food I want to eat myself. I've al-

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ways felt that the pizza I enjoy the most is the wood-fired oven pizza,” said Ross. “I’ve discussed this with many other chefs and they too have always had the desire to work with a wood-fired oven.

“It’s a terrific product for the customer but it also makes for a great environment to work in—everyone wants to do a shift with the oven. The experience ties together basic cooking methods and the primal nature of the fire.”

For Lucarelli, adding a wood-fired oven

was also a result of paying close attention to feedback from patrons.

“Here in America everyone associates an Italian restaurant with pizzas, so after many requests from our great customers I took the challenge and redesigned our bar area to find the position of the oven, and then after to have the best pizza in town. That was my challenge and we did it. I’m proud the locals call us the “Best Pizza on Town,” he said. “And don’t even talk [to me] about our handcrafted pastas!” ■