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# HANDMADE

BY DANIEL GRITZER

## BACKYARD BRICK OVEN



PROSPECT HEIGHTS—The first step was to destroy my mother's strawberry plants. She was attached to them, but I was replacing them with something much better: a wood-burning brick oven.

After hacking at the plants, I stared, shovel-in-hand, at their mangled roots and realized I had just committed myself to a daunting project, the scope of which I hardly understood. It was July 2003 and I had begun to turn my dream of building a brick oven in my backyard into a reality.

Early in the project, people came to my aid: My sister and roommate helped me dig the rectangular pit, 1 foot deep, 7 across, 8 wide. A friend helped me build a wooden form inside the pit and a neighborhood mason hand-mixed more than a ton of concrete as I dumped bucketfuls into the form. Their help reinforced my idea that the oven would bring people together—just as, in ancient times, groups gathered around the communal hearth. (Actually, I paid the mason for his help, but I didn't allow a small detail like that to alter my fantasy.) People would help me build the oven, I imagined, and when it was finished we would enjoy it together.

That was four years ago. The help from friends, family and the mason was the last I would receive.

I was infected with the dream of building the oven in 2001 while working on a large organic farm in southern Tuscany. Sprawling orchards and fields surrounded a tiny hilltop village, and in the center was a 13th-century castle where we farmhands ate lunch together. After lunch I would rest on the worn brick of the castle courtyard, gazing at a blue sky framed by four ochre walls.

One day a farmworker, Urliano, interrupted my repose. He was an oaf of a Tuscan with a chopped haircut, clouded glasses and ghastly teeth.

"Eh, *Brocolino*, come help me with the pigs," he said in Italian.

He affectionately called me *Brocolino*, an Italianized version of "Brooklyn." (Not so lucky was a girl from Chicago called *Ci cago*. It translates as "I shit there.")

Salvatore, another farmworker, had separated a young pig from the rest. We forced it onto its back as Urliano slit its jugular, then slid his finger in and out of the open vein to speed the blood's exit.

While Urliano singed off the pig's bristles with a blowtorch,

I returned to a room off the castle courtyard that housed a stone oven so massive it required two days of intense fire to heat completely. I lit a fire deep in the oven, adding logs until an inferno blazed. Flames shot up the oven walls, bathed the dome, slipped out the oven door and up the chimney. The heat became unbearable and the oven's black stones began to turn white. The sight of the raging flames, contained in the stonework, transfixed me. *I would love to have one of these*, I thought.

The next day we fired the oven again and loaded it with roasting pans filled with pieces of the pig that had been marinated overnight with cherries, rosemary, olive oil and garlic. When I ate the pork, I was convinced: *I am going to build one of these ovens when I go home.*

After I returned to New York, the dream of building the oven remained just that for two years. I was unsure of the legality of mason-

ry ovens in the city, and daunted by learning how to build one. A friend pointed me to a book called *The Bread Builders*, complete with blueprints and instructions, and another put me in touch with a building code expert. When I explained what I was planning to do she said, “Funny. No one’s ever asked me that before. I’ll have to call you back.” Half an hour later she did, and said the oven would be legal as long as it was built on a massive concrete slab, made of noncombustible materials and more than three feet from any other structure. I had my road map and a green light. It was time to dig up the strawberries.

Ironically, as a professional chef I was often too busy cooking to build my own oven. I resorted to working on it late at night under the illumination of halogen lamps. Digging the pit and pouring the foundation were physically draining, but easy compared to the rest of the process. I spent hours at the library studying bricklaying, mortar and concrete. I had no experience with masonry, no vehicle to transport building materials and no driver’s license to rent one. Deliveries were tricky: Few building suppliers would deliver orders as small as mine, and when they did arrive, I carried literally tons of materials from the sidewalk to my backyard in my arms. Laying the bricks took its toll too, as the mortar dried and cracked my hands (all the guides stressed the importance of not touching mortar with your bare hands because it is a powerful desiccant, but I wasn’t deft enough with the trowel alone.)

Still, I progressed in phases and by winter I had built the foundation slab and cinderblock base. With spring’s return, I set to work on the most technically difficult phase: setting the hearth floor and vaulting the arched ceiling. I was worried the ceiling would collapse, but as summer went by, *The Bread Builders’* instructions guided me to completion without incident.

By November it was time to cast the brick dome in a thick layer of concrete, a true test of its structural integrity. I started in the evening and with each bucket of concrete I waited anxiously for a collapse, but my concern was misplaced. As I poured one of the last bucketfuls, the wooden form I’d built to contain the concrete buckled. Like lava seeping through a dam break, the concrete oozed through the warped form. *No, no, no.* I desperately scooped the concrete back into the form, pushing it a little more into place with each scoop. I could feel the concrete solidifying and struggled to stay ahead of it. Once I had the form in position I rigged a makeshift buttress with a crowbar and some extra wood. Petrified, I mixed and poured the last few buckets of concrete and waited for another catastrophic break, but it never came. I etched my name into the drying concrete and went to bed.

With its thick shell of concrete, the oven had enough mass to retain heat. On Thanksgiving morning I woke early and lit a fire for its maiden run. After hours of burning scrap wood, I raked out the embers and put a 14-pound turkey inside. At over 700 degrees, it cooked in half an hour. The oven had plenty of residual heat left and



**Opposite:** The author at various stages of building (right).



felt guilty wasting it, so I ran to the store and bought two chickens. The birds were perfect, with crispy golden skin, moist meat and a slight smoky flavor. My family loved the dinner, but I was so exhausted I fell asleep at the table.

Since then, everything I've cooked in the oven has been extraordinary. Game birds, roasts, savory tarts and pies have all surpassed expectation. Meat exteriors are crispy and caramelized, interiors exceedingly juicy; flatbread and pizza crusts are lightly charred outside and steaming inside; roasted vegetables are browned and tender, their flavor concentrated.

Any cook with good technique can achieve similar results with a standard gas oven and range. But fire gives food a penetrating wood-smoke flavor. Such depth of taste is otherwise unachievable, and reminds the eater of the millennia of human history when cooking by fire was the only method available. The way fire changes food, even just the sight of it, strikes a primal chord in me, an instinctual rever-

ence for flame.

In all, though, I've used the oven no more than 10 times, much less than I'd imagined. Firing it requires the better part of a day, and I'm reluctant to expose my neighbors to frequent smoke. I'm also uncomfortable with the wastefulness of burning so much wood to feed only a few people: Once the oven is hot, the masonry holds enough heat to bake many loaves of bread and then roast meats, which is too much food for all but the largest parties.

Many times during the oven's construction it reminded me of a ruin collapse playing in slow-motion reverse. It seems out of place in its urban surroundings, like a relic of our borough's agrarian past with the city laid down around it. My dream was that it would bring people together. Instead I learned that urban life won't restructure itself so readily. Still, my vision hasn't completely died. When I do finish—hopefully this summer—I'll throw a brick oven party, and, even if only for a day, friends and family will gather around the hearth. □

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