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By Kate Tobin

Special Correspondent

I can actually be quite dangerous," says Phil Doherty of Greenwich. "The bread I was producing was so good, you just couldn't let it sit around."

Doherty, who loves to cook and enjoys a great meal, is referring to the results his HearthKit — an oven insert that turns a conventional home oven into a brick oven — produces.

The HearthKit insert can roast chickens to juicy perfection, keep cookies moistly delicious and make pizzas that are flavorful with crisp crusts. It cooks food from the inside out, not just the outside in.

The insert is the sole item manufactured by the HearthKit Company in Wilton. Apparently, the public is latching on to a good thing.

"We got a little nervous right after Christmas, when people start to return presents," says Sally Russell, company president. "But less than half of one percent of our pre-Christmas orders were returned. That's just unheard of."

"This comes as no surprise to Doherty. He says: "You become quite happy with it quite quickly. I do most of the cooking in the house, and I can tell you, my HearthKit gets used quite a bit."

But how does the HearthKit work its culinary magic? It's all in the construction. The insert is made from a proprietary blend of cordierite ceramic material, molded under 175 tons of pressure, then fired at 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit, which gives it excellent heat retention through high-density thermal mass. In layman's terms, the HearthKit produces an environment that radiates heat from all sides (not just straight up or down), releasing this heat slowly so that foods cook more evenly.

"In a traditional brick-oven, food cooks from the inside out as well as the outside in. This is because three heat principles are at work: conductive, radiant and ambient. The HearthKit releases these three kinds of heat necessary in producing a perfectly balanced heat source. Foods, like roast chicken, can be cooked at higher temperatures, allowing them to sear on the outside and maintain juiciness inside.

And while it may at first seem that the extra 15 to 20 minutes of preheating time the insert requires is an inconvenience, Russell happily points out that in a regular home oven, the heat cycles on and off, interfering with the cook's cooking process. "The HearthKit retains heat in its tapered base and sides just like a brick oven, giving your food constant, stable temperature and cooking it from all sides."

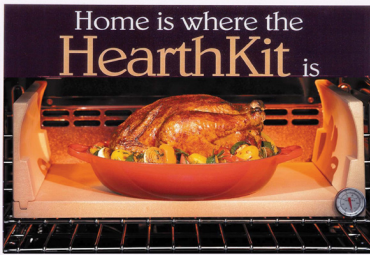
For \$200, you get the oven — which comes in three sizes to fit conventional ovens, a reasonable rack, accurate thermometer, use and care guide, recipe, and instructional video. It can be assembled and installed by the purchaser in less than a minute.

Met Hertzog of Greenwich has been using his HearthKit for two years. He started baking bread but then moved on to the pies his family and friends so enjoy. "Bread is my best. But what's great about the [HearthKit] is that it works wonderfully for anything you need to bake or roast in your oven. It just produces this absolutely dead-even heat."

Doherty has brought the wonders of the HearthKit to his men's cooking group, which meets once a month. "There, its ability to enact a low, slow cooking of various meats has gotten the HearthKit respected as a 'pneedy fifty cooking device."

"And yes," says Doherty, "I have recommended it to family and friends."

HearthKit is garnering a lot of make attention in particular. Company figures show that 70 percent of HearthKit purchasers are men



The HearthKit is an oven insert that turns a conventional home oven into a brick oven.

Contributed Photos

between the ages of 42 and 60. Russell attributes this to her "women buy accessories, men buy tools" theory. "Women go into a cooking store with something specific in mind, they need a whisk or casserole pan, they get it, they leave. Men tend to go in and they need to bake bread or roast something, so they are looking for an appliance or a gadget. "The HearthKit just happens to be the ultimate tool, a brick oven without all the fuss."

"Nice guys love HearthKits," says Russell, "Nice food deserves it."

Locally, the HearthKit can be found at The Complete Kitchen in Greenwich or Ridgefield The Cook's Nook in Norwalk and the Wire Whisk in New Canaan.

For more information on the HearthKit, or sizes and oven measuring instructions, call 1-800-383-7818 or visit their company's website at www.hearthkit.com. E-mail questions or comments to: support@hearthkit.com

PIZZA MARGHERITA

- 2 Neapolitano doughs, approx 6 oz. each
- 1-1/4 cup crushed tomato sauce
- 4 oz. fresh mozzarella cheese, preferably mozz. di bufalino, either sliced into round disks, coarsely shredded, or diced into small chunks
- 2 tablespoons fresh grated Parmigiano Reggiano or Grana Padano cheese (optional)
- 16 fresh, whole basil leaves

Preheat the HearthKit (on the middle shelf unless you know your oven well enough to place it on a different shelf) for about 1 hour, to highest setting. Stretch the dough and transfer to a peel that has been dusted with flour or semolina.

Spread 1-1/4 cup of sauce on each pizza, not quite to the edge, and place 4 basil leaves on top of the sauce, one in each quadrant (you may use more basil if you prefer).

Apply 2 ounces of the mozzarella on the top of sauce and basil, dust with 1 tablespoon of Parmesan. Carefully slide the pizza from the peel onto the HearthKit. (Sprinkle oregano on peel help slide.)



The HearthKit insert can roast meat to juicy perfection, above, keep cookies moistly delicious and make pizzas that are flavorful with crisp crusts, below.



Pizza should take approximately 7 to 9 minutes to bake (only 1 to 2 minutes in a wood fired forno heated to 750° to 800° degrees). The crust should be puffy and slightly charred on the edge or lip, but still thin in the center and the cheese fully melted and just beginning to brown in spots. The underside should be brown and crisp. If it is white and soft when the top is finished, lower the shelf for the next pizza. You can also err on a couple of extra minutes in the oven by loosely covering the top of the pizza with "non-stick" aluminum foil to protect the cheese. Remove the finished pizza from the oven and immediately lay 4 more fresh basil leaves on the top. Serve whole (usually one pizza per person).

— From "American Pie" by Peter Reinhard

HERB RUBBED STANDING IRB ROAST

Dry Rub for Roast Beef

- 2 tablespoon kosher salt
- 4 ounces coarsely ground black pepper
- 4 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme or rosemary or 2 teaspoons dried
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- A 3-bone standing rib roast (10-12 lbs.)

Preheat the oven and HearthKit to 450°F.

In a small bowl combine salt, pepper, herbs & olive oil. Rub all over the roast, especially in any spaces between the meat and bones. For more intense flavor you may season the roast a day ahead, wrap in plastic wrap & refrigerate overnight. When ready to roast, unwrap & proceed with the recipe.

Place the roast bone side down, in a big, shallow roasting pan. Place the roasting pan on the HearthKit and roast for 15 minutes. Turn the oven down to 350°F (check the internal temperature of the roast with an instant-read meat thermometer. If it is not 135°F, continue roasting, checking every 15 minutes or so, until it reaches 135°F. This temperature will give you a moody rare roast, except for the end cuts, which will be medium-rare to medium.

You can roast a little longer to 120° to 125°F if you like medium-rare but be careful not to over cook it.

Remove the roast from the oven and cover it loosely with foil. Let it rest for at least 20 minutes and up to 45 minutes. During this time the temperature of the roast will rise another 5°-10°F and the juices within the roast will be reabsorbed. (You may use the heated HearthKit to finish cooking the rest of your meal.) Carve the roast and serve.

— From "The Complete Meat Cookbook" by Bruce Aidells

For additional HearthKit recipes, visit the website at: www.hearthkit.com or call Customer Support at 1-800-383-7818.