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The Boston Globe

Brick-oven cooking, without bricks

HearthKit helps home cooks make restaurant-quality bread, pizza, and more

By Ken Rivard, Globe Correspondent, 5/30/2002

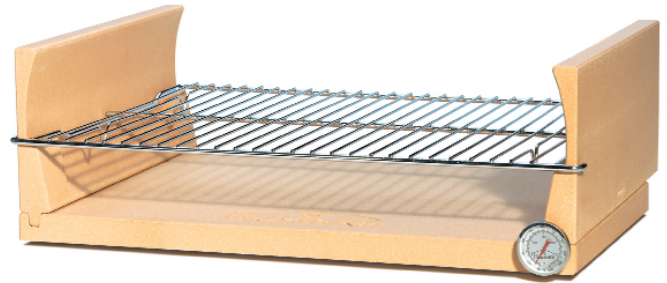
The HearthKit has been getting a lot of press these days, and for good reason: It cooks as well as a brick oven and is practical and affordable for home cooks.

The HearthKit is an “oven insert” made of cordeirite, the same ceramic material used in some pizza stones. Curved sidepieces drop into the grooved base, and the whole unit rests on the top shelf of your oven. The makers promise to recreate the superior effects of brick-oven baking and roasting where you might least expect them: in your home kitchen.

Bakers and restaurant professionals adore brick or hearth ovens because they use radiant and conductive heat in addition to the ambient heat (meaning hot air) of conventional ovens. Ordinary oven walls are thin sheets of metal stuffed with insulation; a brick or hearth oven is made of stone, clay, or, of course, brick. These materials both absorb and radiate heat. The hot floor also conducts heat directly to any cooking vessels in direct contact with it. The net effect produces a more stable heating environment with much greater temperature control (regular ovens cycle on and off, with wide swings in temperature during cooking). Things cook more evenly in a brick oven. For example, artisan bread with crackling crust and chewy interior, and roast chicken with delectably crisp skin encasing juicy meat are much easier to achieve in brick or hearth ovens.

Of course, a real brick oven is also a pain in the neck. It takes time to heat that behemoth, and if the oven is wood-fired, well, say goodbye to your day job. Gas or electric ovens are convenient; that’s why we all stopped cooking in fireplace hearths in the first place. That’s also what makes HearthKit so astonishing: brick-oven effects combined with home-oven ease of use.

I don’t have space to describe each of the dishes I tested, but the effect of the HearthKit was immediate and striking. The most pronounced improvement was in the quality of my bread and pizza. Frankly, it didn’t make a bit of difference whose recipes I used: theirs, mine, somebody else’s. While homemade dough clearly tasted better, even supermarket dough performed better when



baked in the HearthKit instead of on a pizza stone. I often cooked two identical pizzas at once, one in the HearthKit and one on a pizza stone on the shelf below. The one in the HearthKit inevitably cooked faster and the rim of crust puffed higher and was more evenly colored, with crisper exterior, whether I was preparing thin, cracker-style crusts or thicker, Neapolitan pizzas.

The HearthKit transformed my bread, adding a professional crackle to the crusts of both traditional round loaves of white bread and oval loaves of coarser, country-style bread.

Roast chicken emerged from the HearthKit with a parchment-crisp skin - so crisp, in fact, that I was sure I’d let everything overcook. What a surprise to discover the meat was juicy, just right.

A pear ginger crisp, with its crisp, sweet topping and soft, succulent pears beneath, prompted compliments. Pears baked in butter with a dusting of lemon-sugar caramelized beautifully where their surfaces came in contact with the baking dish, an effect I also noticed with roasted vegetables.

Big fat spears of white asparagus roasted in butter and olive oil took only 15 minutes in the HearthKit at 450 degrees, with deep golden caramel stripes on the downsides. Scalloped potatoes and baked macaroni and cheese both had appealing crusty surfaces and evenly cooked interiors.

The HearthKit assembles easily enough, although you need to take some care not to chip the projecting ridges on the bottoms of the side pieces while inserting them into the grooved base. The use and care guide does emphasize that the side pieces will chip if you try to slide them into the base instead of carefully lowering them directly into the grooves. In the event that you do break one of the ceramic components, individual replacements are available from the manufacturer. A thermometer fits

into a channel on the right front corner of the HearthKit so you can tell when it has reached the proper temperature.

The HearthKit comes in three sizes, from 17 to 20.5 inches wide, all priced the same; depending on the size of your oven, figure on ceding one-third to one-half of its space to the HearthKit.

Cooking with the HearthKit does require some slight reconfiguring of kitchen habits. Extra time needs to be allotted to preheating in order to bring the HearthKit up to temperature. Ordinarily, this is only a matter of tacking on an extra 15 or 20 minutes, or preheating at a higher temperature, then lowering the oven temperature once the HearthKit is ready. Also, the HearthKit does such a good job crisping the exterior of foods before the inside overcooks that I've had to shift some of my expectations concerning external color and degree of internal doneness. In the case of my chicken, and some types of bread, for example, the deep external color suggested to me that the interior might have been overcooked, when in fact it was perfect.

I would also suggest purchasing the "retrieval tool," a kind of mini-pizza peel, available from the HearthKit Web site, used for pulling hot dishes out of the oven. When you're removing a hot, 3 1/2-quart casserole of molten pasta and cheese, having something to slide under the dish to help lift it out of the oven is more preferable to reaching inside. The last thing you want to do is touch a radiating 500-degree interior oven wall, even with insulated mitts.

HearthKit maintenance is a snap. If you're concerned about preserving its like-new appearance, leave it in the oven during the self-cleaning cycle; the HearthKit will return (mostly) to its like-new, bisque-colored purity.

I'm not surprised this product comes trailing clouds of glory in the form of endorsements from cookbook heavyweights Peter Reinhart ("The Bread Baker's Apprentice"), Rose Levy Beranbaum ("The Cake Bible," "The Pie and Pastry Bible"), and Bruce Aidells ("The Complete Meat Cookbook"). These are serious writers, devoted to closing the gap between what culinary professionals can achieve and what a home cook can do. The HearthKit clearly gives the home team a boost.

At \$200, the HearthKit isn't cheap, but with a 10-year warranty (on the ceramic pieces) it still seems a good value for serious cooks.

In my fantasy life, my backyard beehive brick oven is only a step from the kitchen door. Until then, the HearthKit will do just fine.

The HearthKit is available directly from www.hearthkit.com or locally at Kitchen Etc. stores.

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