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# Hearth At Home

## FOOD ADVENTURES

by Faith Middleton

(February 17, 2002)—For a week I had been awaiting its arrival, asking the painter each night after I returned home from work, “Any packages?” On a Friday, I opened the front door and there it was; the painter must have accepted the delivery.

I trembled with anticipation as I ripped into the cardboard to get a look at what I’d been hearing so much about.

A year ago, a chef friend confirmed a rumor that someone was developing a small ceramic insert for a regular household oven that would mimic one of those Italian stone ovens people are paying \$5,000- \$10,000 to have built into their kitchens.

People are willing to pay dearly to construct big stone ovens because they achieve the kind of intense high heat that gives foods an unbeatable flavor and texture. If you’ve ever tried Pepe’s Pizza in New Haven, you understand what I’m talking about; their pizza is cooked in coal ovens that produce an unforgettable roasted flavor in the topping, and the perfect crispy crust. Those artisanal breads with moist, airy insides, and delicious brittle exteriors are that way because they’ve been baked in super-high-heat ovens. Our ordinary home ovens simply cannot achieve the kind of sustained intense heat I’m talking about.

When I learned that an oven insert does, in fact, exist under the name HearthKit, I was on the phone immediately to get my hands on it. The surprise was that the company is right here in Connecticut, in Wilton.

HearthKit is a simple ceramic insert that fits easily inside gas or electric home ovens, including an oven that has a convection option. The ceramic insert comes in three pieces that fit together without screws, wires, etc. You simply remove one of your oven racks and slide in the three-sided insert. The top of your oven acts as the fourth side.

Once HearthKit is heated to the desired temperature, it tends to remain at that temperature, creating the desired effect; most home ovens cycle on and off throughout the



cooking process when the desired temperature is achieved, making it impossible to achieve consistency.

I decided to roast a chicken first, remembering those perfect roast chickens I enjoyed two years ago in Paris. I washed off the chicken, patted it dry, rubbed it with olive oil, then coated it with a store-bought rub of crushed fennel, garlic and lemon zest. I chopped up some onions and stuffed them into the cavity with a preserved whole lemon. I placed the chicken in a roasting pan, and tossed in some sweet potatoes, onions and carrots. The HearthKit booklet makes a big deal of not starting the cooking until the oven has had a chance to heat the ceramic insert to the desired temperature; this took a half-hour. HearthKit comes with its own thermometer and when it read 450 degrees, I slid in my roasting pan and closed the door. The booklet said I could speed up browning by turning on convection, which I have, during the last 15 minutes of cooking, and so I did.

When my thermometer said my chicken was done, I opened the oven door and pulled out the pan. There was my chicken crisped to mahogany perfection; the vegetables were glistening in the chicken’s own juices. I lifted the chicken onto a platter, arranged the vegetables around it, and made a simple pan gravy on the stove-top.

The kitchen smelled heavenly and I was so taken with the chicken’s looks, I put my ordinary wine back into the refrigerator and decided to open something a little snazzier. My guest and I swooned when we took our first bites of the perfectly roasted, lusciously moist bird. It was drop-dead amazing, in fact, as good as any chicken I had in Paris. To date, I have roasted vegetables and stews in the

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HearthKit insert, with wonderful results. In fact, I just keep the insert in my oven permanently because I plan to use it for just about everything. You can roast a turkey, potatoes, casseroles, meats, even frozen vegetables in the HearthKit. Or, you can bake cookies, pies and muffins.

It's a shame I don't bake much, especially bread, because I suspect HearthKit would give bread and pizza that fabulous crispy exterior. In fact, having said that, I'm up for trying pizza next.

*The HearthKit ceramic oven insert sells for about \$200 from the Hearth Kitchen Company (800-383-7818), or online at [www.hearthkitchen.com](http://www.hearthkitchen.com). Kitchen Etc. in West Hartford and Milford also carry the HearthKit.*

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