

As seen in:

# Cool Tools

WITH BITE

by Karola Saekel

(February 02, 2002)—Giving pizza and breads that wood-fired crunch, at home

Breads with crisp or chewy exteriors and a coarse, sturdy crumb are all the rage in upper-crust restaurants and stores that depend on artisanal bakers to fill their bread baskets and bins. To provide such old-fashioned loaves, these bakers increasingly turn back to brick ovens of the kind their real or spiritual forebears fired up along the Rhone, the Rhine or the Rubicon.

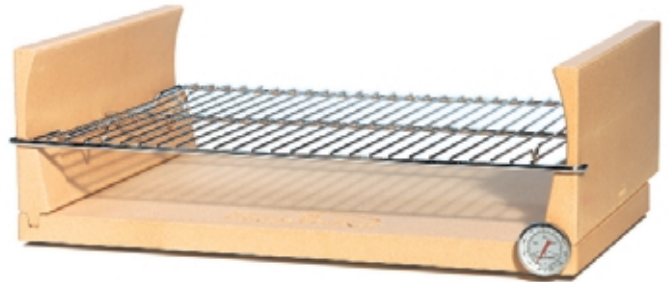
The same goes for pizzas; even roast meats and fowl take on a chic cachet if they can boast of being wood-fire cooked.

So do you have to part with a few thousand dollars (and half your patio) to build an oven that will turn up the heat on your culinary reputation?

No way, say some smart young entrepreneurs who have founded Hearth Kitchen Co., which modestly plans to revolutionize home baking and roasting. First thing out of their creative ovens is HearthKit, an oven insert cum rack which promises to convert your own gas or electric oven into a virtual brick oven. Unlike the familiar pizza stone that essentially gives you a sizzling-hot cooking surface, this new product creates a three-sided enclosure that works as a heat chamber, counteracting home ovens' normal temperature fluctuations (as much as 75 degrees as a standard thermostat regulates heat on/off cycles).

The HearthKit promoters promise that a combination of conductive, radiant and ambient heat will give you professional results, whether you want to bake Pugliese, Jewish rye or calzone, slow-simmer an elegant stew or roast a joint worthy of King Arthur's table.

The gadget, made of earthen materials fired at 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit, is nearly indestructible (that's why it carries a 10-year warranty). It comes in three sizes, with a tape provided to let you measure your oven, which, incidentally, can be a deluxe model or a stripped-down



economy number (same results, presumably). It even works in a hooded grill, so you can bake pizza on the patio.

The HearthKit can be left in the oven indefinitely. (Thank heavens -- it weighs over 30 pounds.) It looks and works well with a certain patina from frequent use, so it basically doesn't need cleaning, though the self-cleaning feature of a home oven may be used by the fastidious.

The Hearth Kitchen producers had their insert tested by a bunch of well-known culinary personalities across the country and have some glowing testimonials. Here in the Bay Area, Nancy Oakes, chef/owner of Boulevard restaurant, did a demonstration media lunch, cooking four courses -- black truffle pizza, prawns, braised Kobe beef cheeks and a free-form apple pie -- using the gadget. The food was, predictably, fabulous, but should have probably carried one of those warnings that "results may vary" if you don't have Oakes' consummate skills and stellar ingredients.

HearthKit is currently carried exclusively by Sur la Table cookware stores (local branches on Maiden Lane in San Francisco, Fourth Street in Berkeley and on University Avenue in Los Gatos) and in the store's online catalog in the 17- and 20.5-inch sizes for \$200. Call Hearth Kitchen, (800) 383-7818 for more information or go to [www.surlatable.com](http://www.surlatable.com) and type in keyword [hearthkit](http://www.hearthkit.com).