

Build Yourself A "Summer Kitchen"



"Outdoor kitchen" is built from cordwood stacked and mortared together like bricks.



Fire burns in oven for an hour or two before food is placed inside to cook.

By Janis Schole, Contributing Editor

"Cordwood Kitchen" Feeds Family Outdoors

Hans and Marianne Pfäeffli enjoy the unique luxury of their "outdoor kitchen," where they often cook and eat summer meals. The backyard structure and its big oven were both built from cordwood stacked and mortared together like bricks.

"I used White Poplar firewood that I cut into 9-in. long pieces, building the walls up by a couple of feet each day, giving them time to dry in-between. The wood must be really dry when you cement it in – mine was dried for a couple of years," Hans explains. "I have cement footings to keep the base of the oven and shack level, plus they protect the wood from ground moisture. We've got two windows in the shack for light, and they let us see out to the driveway."

The 12-ft. wide shelter has a sloped, tar-shingled roof that's 10 ft. tall in the front, and tapers to 7 ft. in back. Pfäeffli cemented the roof trusses into the wall for durability.

Pfäeffli filled the center of the oven's cordwood base with rocks, concrete chunks and sand to increase its heat-storing capacity. He then capped it with a 3 in. thick concrete slab he made with refractory cement. This forms the baking surface, and juts out about a foot from the 4-ft. dia. base, providing "counter space."

Over the course of six days, Pfäeffli used two forms to make 12 orange section-shaped pieces of refractory concrete. Together, they form the dome shell, which sits on top of the base, creating the oven cavity (with an opening for access). He also made two small blocks with handles, using the special cement,

and these serve as oven doors.

Pfäeffli covered the dome with rock wool insulation (similar to fiberglass insulation mats), chicken wire, and stucco. He says it insulates very well... after a big fire, you can put your hand on top of the dome, and it's barely warm, according to Pfäeffli.

"The refractory cement was necessary so it doesn't crack or crumble from the high temperatures," he says. "It was my biggest cost – about \$1,000."

For baking bread, Pfäeffli first removes the doors and makes a large wood fire inside the oven, burning it for an hour or two. Then, he scrapes it all out, puts in his bread dough, and closes the doors. He bakes a dozen loaves at a time, and they're ready in an hour.

Pfäeffli uses the oven year-round to bake bread and, thanks in part to large trees nearby, there's enough shelter that no winterizing of the cook shack is necessary.

"For cooking things like pizza, roasts, potatoes, and vegetables, I make a fire, preheat the oven for at least an hour, then push the charcoal off to one side, and put the food in to cook while the fire's still burning. I keep the heat constant by adding a little wood as necessary. I put everything I need for a meal in there at the same time and just move it around, according to the temperature each dish requires," he explains.

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Brick Oven Built For Less Than \$1,000

Dale Neese of Cottage Hills, Ill., spent less than \$1,000 to build a backyard brick oven. The 70-year-old widower has several physical problems, not the least of which is a bad back, but he still did all the work himself.

The attractive oven is 4 1/2 ft. wide by 5 1/2 ft. long, by just over 6 ft. high (not including the flue) and has two levels that each have openings in the front. The lower level has a brick floor and is empty, except for a pail to catch ashes. The main purpose of the lower level is to elevate the upper levels.

"Because of my back, I didn't want to have to bend over," Neese explains. "It's a black oven – the kind where you build the fire right inside the oven. When you get it to the temperature you want, you rake the fire out and put in the bread. For pizza, you just push the fire to the back and put in the pizza."

An 11 by 17-ft. aluminum awning protects

Neese from rain and the sun's heat. He installed it in front of the unit so that it's right against the flue and extends out from each side of the oven a few feet.

After completing the bottom half, Neese placed reinforcing rods in both directions across the top, with plywood for a platform beneath. He then poured about 2 in. of moderately heavy cement and partially set in multiple hooks he had made from nails. Once this dried, the hooks added strength to the bond with Neese's second floor, which consists of 1 1/2 in. of refractory concrete and Perlite insulation.

"On top of the second floor, I used 4 in. of fire brick, on top of which I built the oven. To do that, I used more fire brick and fire clay (at least 4 in.), aluminum foil, lightweight concrete (that contains as its aggregate, Haydite - also called expanded shale),

diatomaceous earth to take care of any cracks, and then moderate weight concrete, Perlite insulation, and the red brick skin."

Neese also installed 3 ft. of 9 by 9-in. flue liner in the flue.

Between the oven's two front openings, Neese included a ledge made with 12-in. bull nose brick (brick with a rounded front edge). He had also left an opening in the floor to serve as an "ash dump." It's just outside the door, but behind the bull nose brick, and when Neese scrapes out his oven, the ash collects into a metal waste can just inside the bottom arch. This feature works very well, he says.

The oven door has three layers with metal on the inside and oak on the outside, plus two handles.

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Italian Bread Oven Built From Memory

One of Frank Aiello's best childhood memories is the fragrance and taste of large round loaves of bread lovingly baked by his Italian parents and grandparents in an Italian bread oven.

"My grandmother, mother and aunts would all get together once a week to bake bread together at the home we were living in at the time in Iowa," says the Violin, S. Dak., resident.

Last summer Frank decided to build his own oven. Both he and his wife, Judy, say the taste and texture of foods cooked in the oven are quite different than food cooked in a conventional stove.

"Bread just gets so brown and crisp," Judy says. "Cheese on pizza is just liquid, it gets so hot. Pizza cooks in about three or four minutes."

Because he couldn't recall exact dimensions of his family's oven, Frank researched brick oven designs and settled on one closely resembling the oven he remembered. He wasn't skilled in working with cement or laying brick, but found he could do most of the work himself.

"Maybe there are some mistakes I haven't found yet, and I probably could have imported one for the same cost or less, but I wanted to see if I could do it," Frank says.



Frank Aiello built this Italian bread oven to resemble the one used by his parents and grandparents when he was growing up.

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Dale Neese and the brick oven he built. It has two levels that each have openings in the front.