

ALL

FIRE

Brick ovens cook up perfect pizzas & more
at these innovative Tucson restaurants

UP!

Appealing at any time of year, the aroma of brick-oven cooking is especially evocative in the winter season, when images of home and hearth pervade the airwaves. No matter if your mother never used anything but an electric stove, or if the furnace in the basement of your apartment building was the closest thing around to a hearth—during this season, Hallmark specials are as likely as memory to incite one's taste buds. And although Tucson's streets may not turn up many vendors of chestnuts roasted on an open fire—there's little demand here for victuals that'll warm your hands—food that has been cooked over wood is a draw at a number of this city's nicer restaurants.

The beehive-shaped *horno* oven, long used by the native peoples of the Southwest to bake bread, is an early version of the domed cooking devices increasingly pressed into service in many chic eateries today. And of course using wood to heat food was the only option for the Spanish explorers and the Mexican and Anglo settlers who succeeded them in this region. But by the late 19th century, families making their home on the frontier hankered after the "civilization" and conveniences Back East. They turned to gas, and, eventually, electric ovens for cooking, as did the restaurants that catered to them. There's a certain

irony in the fact that the resurgence of interest in brick ovens in the Southwest comes to us from Italy—via California.

The first restaurant to introduce this method of food preparation to Tucson was **Café Terra Cotta**, which celebrated its 10th anniversary this past July. Donna Nordin, who owns the restaurant with her husband, Don Luria, hails from the San Francisco Bay area. She modeled the restaurant's brick oven, built from scratch, after the one used by culinary innovator Alice Waters at Berkeley's Chez Pânissee. Nordin and Luria got additional inspiration from Los Angeles's Spago, where Wolfgang Puck's "designer" pizzas—as the pies using lighter, non-traditional toppings are frequently dubbed—were fast becoming popular. Nordin and Luria wanted diners to be able to eat as much or as little as they liked at a meal. Individual 10-inch pizzas, which could constitute a light repast or serve as an appetizer when shared, fit that concept perfectly.

This is not to suggest that California is Café Terra Cotta's only influence. Everything about the restaurant says Southwest, from its large blue copper doors and the heightened desert tones of the



artwork to the inviting terrace looking out onto the Spanish-style fountains of tony St. Philip's Plaza. Moreover, the distinctive cooking style that has been evolving in this region during the last decade and a half, characterized by the use of indigenous ingredients and an Asian sense of culinary aesthetics, is very much in evidence here.

As a menu special you might find, for example, a beautifully presented array of blue-corn tortilla chips surrounding a spicy mound of sushi-style ahi tuna salad. The toppings on many of the fragrant pizzas that emerge from the wood-burning oven—artichoke bottoms, say, or pesto and prawns—are also characteristic of this type of cuisine. A “Your Choice” pizza lets diners combine fresh versions of such standards as pepperoni, tomatoes, mushrooms, and peppers on their pies. Not only can you have it your way, you can also have it fast: The intense heat of

the oven—temperatures rise as high as 900 degrees—allows the pizza to be cooked in about five minutes.

The aptly named **Ovens** is in the same upscale shopping complex as Café Terra Cotta, and also owes the installation of its wood-burning namesake to the influence of Alice Waters. This is not mere coincidence, however: Candace

Grogan, co-owner of the restaurant with James Caljean, is from the San Francisco Bay area and was originally a partner in Café Terra Cotta. As a result of that earlier union, Grogan was able to bring a good deal of hands-on experience to the new venture. For one thing, having discovered that ovens made from brick alone eventually become unstable because of the high-volume use required in the restaurant business, Grogan and Caljean started out in 1991 with a steel-reinforced Pasquini oven imported from Italy. (Café Terra Cotta installed a similar oven two years ago.)

The owners were also aware of the advantages of using pecan, rather than mesquite wood, as fuel. Both woods burn hot, but mesquite has a good deal more resin and thus produces a lot of flying embers—not one of your more desirable pizza toppings. It's an advantage too that pecan trees, which become unproductive with age, are plentiful in this area. And most important, the wood imparts a delightfully subtle, nutty taste to the food.

There's an outdoor terrace in the back and a glamorous black-and-white bar to the left as you enter, but in the cheerful main dining room of the bistro, the brick oven holds pride of place: Diners can sit around a pounded-tin counter and watch the chef turn out a

variety of exotic pies. Among the aromatic creations is a Sonoran shrimp pizza with salsa, fontina cheese, and a dash of fresh lime. Other interesting variations on a theme include the pizza salad—a crusty base topped with grilled eggplant, caramelized onions, fresh spinach, and pine nuts. The eclecticism that characterizes Southwest cuisine is also celebrated here. The wood-fired oven turns out an appealing moo shu calzone—pizza dough wrapped around chicken, bean sprouts, hoisin sauce, mushrooms, and mozzarella.

For those who want the full-on Italian experience of wood-fired cooking, **Trattoria Pina**, on the city's northeast side, fits the bill. The plant-filled dining room is reminiscent of a Roman *palazzo*, with antique-yellow walls, marble floors, classical columns, and Italian opera playing in the background. High ceilings, lots of windows, a patio with little sparkling lights, and exposed beams add drama to the scene, but the bustle of friendly servers—and of course the pizza oven—all lend warmth. Children love to stand in front of the oven and watch the paddle move in and out, bearing goodies that they happily consume—if you can get them back into their seats.

Owner Pina Ali Colosimo, for whom the restaurant is named, grew up in the business. Her parents own Da Vinci's, a longtime favorite on Tucson's Italian restaurant scene; her father, Cosmo Ali, is now the trattoria's chef. Mr. Ali learned his trade in Tuscany, a region of Italy particularly renowned for its wood-fire cooking, and Trattoria Pina's oven has given him an opportunity to practice his art.

But here's a twist: while the California-inspired owners of Café Terra Cotta and Ovens imported their cooking implements from Italy, Pina's husband, restaurant manager Fedelle Colosimo, turned to Pasadena when it came to making the purchase. And he selected a model about as high-tech as they come, featuring heat-retaining panels created by NASA engineers.

The oven may be state-of-the-art, but the pizzas and calzones it turns out

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are traditional, with pepperoni, *prosciutto*, mozzarella, mushrooms, and garlic as recurring ingredients. The oven is frequently called upon to produce special dishes as well; one day you might find an appetizer of *pita schiacciata*—flat

bread topped with tomato, black olives, basil, olive oil, and balsamic vinegar—or an entrée of ahi *à la Toscana*. The latter is baked in foil, which renders the fish supremely moist and sears in the flavors of the spinach, mushrooms, onions, tomatoes, olive oil, and garlic that envelop it. A medley of colorful oven-grilled vegetables is likely to accompany the main course—carrots,

zucchini, red potatoes, and yellow squash all emerge from the oven deliciously *al dente*.

Also on the east side of town, **City Grill** combines the cosmopolitanism of New York's Soho with a casual Tucson atmosphere. At the time of this writing, the restaurant was in the process of remodeling, but owner Sam Fox says the postmodern mix-it-up decor—exposed-pipe ceiling, faux marble booths with comfortable cushions, lots of towering palms—will definitely remain a constant. The atmosphere is super-hip but the diners don't tend to wear black and the servers aren't sullen. A huge mural on the right side of the room, depicting Route 66 as an octopus (which unfortunately may not survive the remodeling), draws the eye to the open kitchen, where a pizza oven is decked out with colorful mosaic tile. Come closer, and you'll notice the aroma of pecan wood permeating the air.

As at Trattoria Pina, the proximity of City Grill's wood-fired oven to the other areas of food preparation makes it feasible for the restaurant to put together a number of special entrées cooked in the oven. *Bresoles* (a flank steak with goat cheese, walnuts, and marinara sauce), pork tenderloin, or baked stuffed lobster might turn up on any given night. A dessert pizza, topped with caramelized apples, creamy *mascarpone* cheese, and pecan streusel, might also make an appearance.

Although there's a slight Southwestern influence—chef Robert Mundell worked previously at both Café Terra Cotta and Ovens—most of the dishes are contemporary American. Take dessert, for example. What could be more American than a chocolate chip cookie? In this case, though, it's about the size of the restaurant's 10" pizzas and it's baked in the wood-fired oven. The cookie arrives at the table still hot, bearing two scoops of rapidly melting vanilla ice cream.

New to City Grill is the rotisserie, where meats such as chicken, lamb, and pork take their turns over a variety of woods, including mesquite and apple wood. With this method of cooking, in which the food is raised above the logs rather than sitting adjacent to them, stray embers don't pose a problem.

A combination of nostalgia and a desire to relax draws a variety of folks to **Time Market**—a deli, gourmet market, and pizza place housed in a historic building near the University of

Arizona. The market's antecedents go back to a time when wood-burning stoves were still being used in Tucson: Pioneer Market opened its doors in downtown Tucson before the turn of the century. Soon after 1932, when the produce and butcher shop moved to its current location—the area was then considered a suburb—it changed its name to Time Market. John Hardy, who later opened Tucson's first supermarket, El Rancho, became a partner in the business in 1937 and introduced shoppers to an early version of the grocery cart here.

Current owners Peter Wilke, 27, and Yongsoo Seo, 34, may seem too young to be much concerned with the past, but since they took over the place a little more than a year ago, they've been working hard to restore it to its pristine state. They spent hours stripping linoleum to uncover the market's original ash floors. And although some of their ideas for the business are very

1990s—plans for an espresso bar are on the drawing board—their attitude hearkens back to a kinder, friendlier time. Their “market research” consists largely of asking their friends' and customers' opinions on what they like.

The wood-fired oven, installed in 1991, may have come with the place, but the new owners are making it very much their own: Wilke's Italian mother contributed her recipe for the pizza sauce, and Wilke is trying to create the perfect crust in both white and whole-wheat versions. Toppings haven't escaped Wilke's attention either—he's been buying handmade sausage from the Rocking R Ranch south of Tucson and is thinking about introducing some snazzy newcomers to an already interesting array of pizza possibilities—anyone for pineapple/jalapeño?

The wine and beer selection in the market section is very impressive, but there's a catch: Because of the Presbyterian church next door, alcohol cannot be consumed within 500 yards of the premises. This is one of the reasons Time Market does a thriving delivery business, sending a cold brew and even your favorite newspaper along with a pie if you like. A

fresh pizza, an import ale, and the *New York Times*—now there's a definition of holiday (and post-holiday) cheer a lot of people can get behind. ☘

Edie Jarolim moved to Tucson from New York City five years ago. Her articles have appeared in a wide range of publications from Arizona Highways to the Wall Street Journal.

CAFÉ TERRA COTTA

4310 N. Campbell Ave. (in St. Philip's Plaza), 577-8100

CITY GRILL

6350 E. Tanque Verde Rd., 733-1111

Ovens

4280 N. Campbell Ave. (in St. Philip's Plaza), 577-9001

TIME MARKET DELI & PIZZA

444 E. University Blvd., 622-0761

TRATTORIA PINA

5541 N. Swan Rd., 577-6992



You'll notice the
aroma of pecan wood
permeating the air.

