

Goodbye barbie, hello pizza oven

Spiri Tsintziras, The Age, February 11, 2008

Aussie blokes are turning to other cultures to develop their love for the backyard barbecue, writes Spiru Tsintziras.

FIRE, earth and water. The modern Australian male has long used the humble barbecue as a conduit for these basic elements. Now men across Melbourne's suburbs are tossing their tongs in favour of more sophisticated implements - with delicious results.

For 58-year-old mechanic Ivan Mazeyko, the journey started some years ago. He wanted to build a wood-fired oven in his backyard. He talked about it with friends and family, but no one thought it would ever happen.

In preparation, he did a course on building a wood-fired oven, read books and spoke to lots of other men. Then he knocked down a corner of his garage. Once he got going, he couldn't stop. He built the oven. And a charcoal-fired barbecue like those of his native Uruguay. And cupboards using materials from his old indoor kitchen. And lights so he could use it at night. And a spatula to remove the bread ...

"At my age, some men run away with their secretary or buy a motorbike. I did all that when I was young. Instead I built a kitchen in my backyard."

He scoured his workshop, garage sales and scrap metal yards for materials. Each part of the kitchen reflects Ivan's meticulous attention to detail: from the gear stick handles on the oven door; to the \$50 industrial copper fan; to the handmade switches for operating the overhanging lights. His latest addition is a \$5 temperature gauge from Camberwell market, welded carefully into the oven door.

The oven is lit at least once a month. Ivan's wife Elizabeth makes more than 10 pizzas by hand each time. These are shared with their two daughters and grandchildren.

The recently retired Ivan, who had been working since he was 15, says, "I worked hard but I never really liked work". Now he rejoices in being a full-time "grandfather and pizza maker".

From his canvas garden chair under a grapevine, Ivan says he would light the oven every day if he could - he finds it very relaxing. His movements are sure and slow, contained and confident, as he checks on the pizzas. It is clear that the temptation of secretaries and motorbikes is long behind him. Garden and grandchildren, food and fire now sustain him.

When Mark Dymiotis hears of Ivan's interest in fire, he is not surprised. "Men like to play with fire. They like to have exclusivity when it comes to firing the oven up." And he would know - he has taught thousands of people how to build wood-fired ovens over the past 15 years from his Hampton home.

Mostly men do Mark's wood-fired oven courses, though he says there are always a few women in each class. And it's mostly women who do the bread-making courses. There is no particular pattern when it comes to cultural background or age. Students often send photos of their work and invite Mark to see their work.

One such former student, Dr Murray Rudman, went on to build a wood-fired oven in his Kensington backyard six years ago to do justice to his passion for baking bread. "Nothing tastes as good as the bread that comes out of a wood-fired oven," he says. These days he also uses it for pizzas, roasts, grilled meats and even casseroles.

"When I was building it, my wife used to call the oven my mistress. I was spending more time with it than with her." The process of creating something with his hands from raw elements like bricks and mortar appealed to Murray, who is a scientist with CSIRO. He redesigned the oven three or four times before he was happy with it. He says he would not hesitate to build another one.

The oven has not replaced his small gas barbecue, which he mainly uses for something quick after work. "Firing up the wood-fired oven is a much longer proposition. But this is all part of the appeal," he says.

Mark Dymiotis' own two wood-fired ovens stand outside a sliding door in the room in which he teaches. The largest of these takes up to 20 loaves at a time, the smaller is designed for roasts. The classroom was once an outdoor area that has now been enclosed. Ceiling windows let in the warm spring sunshine. An abundant Mediterranean garden can be seen through the back window. Underneath this window sits a table, laden with olives drying in the sun.

In one of the garden sheds, Mark reveals a handmade box with a tray of dark liquid underneath. He opens up the lid to show little black olives tossed in coarse salt. He gently turns these before leaving them to dispel their bitter juices. Nearby, another cool cellar room houses glass jars of homemade wine.

He learnt the skills of preserving food, making wine and fostering the many fruit trees, vegetables and herbs in his garden mostly from older Greek and Italian immigrants. "I am not the expert, they are," he says.

Mark says his courses are not only surviving, they are thriving. "People are prepared to pay to learn basic skills that traditionally would have been handed down from generation to generation."

Formerly an engineer, Mark says his interest in sustainability stemmed from the natural way of life of his childhood in Cyprus. "In as far as possible, I believe in eating fresh produce, be it home-grown or bought, which is unrefined, unprocessed and unpackaged."

The lunch he prepares attests to this simple philosophy: an omelet of stinging nettles, mint and spring onions from his garden. Olives are scooped up from the back table. These are joined by pickled peppers, cubes of fetta cheese steeped in olive oil, dressed with a few sprigs of home-grown oregano and dense home-baked bread. This is accompanied by wine. Time stands still just for a few moments as we sample the clean flavours of this wonderfully simple feast.

Across town in a rambling yard in Pascoe Vale, criminal lawyer Domenico Calabro is a world away from the demands of legal life. He is showing off bundles of carefully wrapped prosciutto. These will hang from his mother's garden shed for a whole year before they are ready to be sliced. A shiny industrial meat slicer has been bought on eBay for the bargain price of \$250 specially for the task.

Domenico's family have been bottling sauce, making sausages, and curing prosciutto, pancetta and capicollo in their backyard since 1950. His mother Leandra transported these skills from her native Calabria. In her village, these were skills necessary for survival. Excess produce was preserved and eaten in the months when it wasn't available. In the early days in Melbourne, the 84-year-old says, she couldn't buy things like artichokes or figs, so she grew them herself. But what inspires the Calabro family to keep up those traditions in an age when the local supermarket stocks everything from pecorino to prosciutto?

"When I was young it was a drag making all this stuff. You did it because you had to. It is only as I've gotten older that I can appreciate and enjoy it for its own sake," says Domenico. His mother adds: "At least you know what you are eating."

And there is much to eat in this garden which is reminiscent of a rustic Italian village orchard. Rambling grape vines are held up by recycled pipes. A huge, knotty fig tree stretches majestically in one corner. Fennel used to spice the sausages waves gently in the breeze. A freezer sits in one of the sheds, crammed with carefully labelled home-grown produce.

"The garden looks bad, do not tell how bad it looks," despairs Mrs Calabro as we brush past the 40-year-old wood-fired oven covered in cobwebs. The maintenance required to keep the garden up to scratch is now beyond Mrs Calabro, whose deceased husband kept the garden immaculate in its heyday.

"She advises these days and we do the work," says Domenico in a deferential tone. But he has his own growing body of knowledge which he is also passing on to his children. This ensures that the get-togethers at the Calabro family home to preserve produce are still a festive, loud affair.

And so the journey continues - from fire to festivity, from pizza to prosciutto, from garden to grandson, the traditional outdoor kitchen in all its guises fires up the belly of men across the suburbs.