



Tribune photos by MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER

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Bread Man Shares Lovin' From His Oven



A brick-oven aficionado breaks bread with neighbors and shares tips with the world.

By KATHY STEELE
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Vanderdonck feeds the fire with branches and logs. It takes three to four hours for the oven to reach 700 degrees for his gourmet breads and pizza.

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On weekends, the brick oven he built in his back yard is stoked to 700 degrees. He bakes *pain l'Ancienne*, *pain de Campagne*, *pane Siciliano*, *ciabatta*, *anadama* bread, French baguettes and braided challah to name a few.

Last weekend, he and his wife, Cheyanne, and their son Charley, 2, passed out bagels to neighbors.

Pizza parties at their McBerry Street home are frequent. Guests arrive with favorite ingredients, from mushrooms to pineapple to shredded barbecue pork. On a recent weekend there was a potato chip pizza.

The dough, rolled thin, thin, thin, cooks in two minutes or less.

"It's hard to describe," said Stan Lasater, who recently at-

tended his first pizza party. "It has a totally different flavor and texture. I've never seen it anywhere else in the States."

Vanderdonck's circle of friends spreads globally through the Brick Oven Map he created on the Internet. That's how he met fellow brick-oven lovers such as Jack Sanders, of Spring Hill in Hernando County, and Rado Hand, of Brisbane, Australia.

Hand loves the tradition of brick ovens.

"So primitive but effective and interesting, it will not let us down," he wrote in an e-mail this week.

Log on to www.frapp.com/brickoventampa and find nearly 100 brick-oven builders and bakers in the United States, Denmark, Australia, Uganda, the Philippines, Greece and Canada. They post photographs of their ovens and chat via e-mail on the

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Ybor bakery was inspiration.

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how-to's and don'ts of building them. And, of course, swap recipes.

This all began on a whim.

"I've never laid two bricks on top of each other before in my life," Vanderdonckt said.

He's a financial specialist for T. Rowe Price. At heart, he's a baker.

Growing up in Belgium, he remembers leaning over a chair in the kitchen watching his mother cook.

"I loved to cook," he said. "But I didn't like it to be work."

He thought about being a chef, but his parents put him to the test, sending him to work at a friend's restaurant. Under the chef's command, he made desserts. It wasn't to his liking.

When his family moved to the United States nine years ago, Vanderdonckt found breads didn't taste the same.

"Bread doesn't have a crust here," he said.

He sometimes baked bread in a conventional oven but wanted something better. He turned to the Internet, where he found Web sites galore on bread making and brick ovens.

But, he said, "It wasn't necessarily helpful in how to build it."

His research led him to "The Bread Builder," by Alan Scott. The book taught him everything he needed to know with one exception, how to build the oven's chimney. That took more research.

Vanderdonckt set his plan in motion in 2004 but waited for hurricane season to blow past.

Building the slab foundation took 40 bags of concrete and a



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August Vanderdonckt communicates with brick-oven lovers around the world via the Internet. They post photos of their ovens, swap oven-building and cooking techniques, and share recipes.

ton of elbow grease to shovel it. He worked weekends from morning to night, sometimes joined by friends.

Franklin Sebastian, friend and historic preservationist, took him on a tour of Ybor City searching for a pretty look for the oven's outer shell. Vanderdonckt liked the style of the former Ferlita Bakery, now the Ybor City State Museum.

Sebastian started sketching, and Vanderdonckt had his façade. His father-in-law, Gene Paul Nesgoda, pitched in, donating a collection of handmade tiles. Vanderdonckt spent about \$1,500 building the oven.

The first pizza party was Dec. 21, 2004.

The map was a natural. When he started, Vander-

donckt documented his progress with a photo album on his Web site.

"I thought I might as well open it up to the world," he said. "Then people started asking me questions."

That's how he met Sanders, an Army civilian serving in Iraq who described himself in an e-mail as "mechanically challenged." He relied on help from Vanderdonckt and other friends to build his oven in Spring Hill. An artist friend plans soon to paint an iguana on the chimney and the logo: I-guana eat Pizza.

"The folks you talk with around the world are unique in that we all love bread, pizzas, cooking outdoors and entertaining," Sanders wrote in an e-mail.

He hears stories of people building one, then two or three ovens: "It's contagious once you've built one."

Vanderdonckt is thinking of moving beyond bread baking. He has heard tales of savory steaks tossed onto the fire. Meanwhile, he's content to spend lazy days in the back yard, tossing branches and logs into the oven and waiting the three to four hours it takes to fire it up for more bread and pizzas.

"I would like to believe people in the neighborhood will say, 'You know, I'd like one of these in my back yard,'" he said. "I had a good time building it."

Reporter Kathy Steele can be reached at (813) 835-2103.