



# See Vermont

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## Waitsfield: American Flatbread

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**American Flatbread ships to a growing market, but it's best here in Vermont - hot out of the wood-fired oven**



By ANDREW NEMETHY

WAITSFIELD -- George Schenk doesn't think of himself as a local phenomenon, wave rider or gourmet guru, even though that's what he's become. He's just a guy who deeply believes there's a mystical process and power in making food with respect and the best and freshest ingredients.



For 16 years, his philosophy has taken shape in the distinctive, handmade, wood-oven-baked pizzas he calls American Flatbread. Today, using a production system that's purposely, almost incomprehensibly, anti-commercial, his Waitsfield company bakes 4,000 flatbreads a week, freezing and shipping them up and down the Atlantic seaboard and as far west as Chicago.



"It is certainly larger than I originally conceived," admits Schenk, 48, who came up to ski in 1980 from Connecticut and has never left.



He started serving his unconventional flatbreads to diners at the Tucker Hill Lodge, using an outdoor oven he built in 1985. In 1991, he moved to his current spot in a post-and-beam structure besides the Lareau Farm Inn on Route 100.

Schenk is not content to be just a frozen pizza purveyor with a twist, however. Each weekend, in an act of mind-boggling logistical legerdemain, his four-day-a-week "manufacturing plant" becomes a restaurant. The baking racks get cleared and tables with red-checked tablecloths and folding chairs are

put out, turning American Flatbread into the Mad River Valley's - perhaps Vermont's - most unusual eatery.

Only open on Friday and Saturday nights (and some holidays) from 5:30-9:30 p.m., the restaurant doesn't advertise or take reservations, yet still draws a mob of patient diners for whom American Flatbread is to pizza what Ben & Jerry's is to ice cream - a must-experience for anyone in the area.

"Locals love to bring friends. Not many places have 30 cords of wood stacked outside to cook your food," says Jen Moffroid, who handles marketing.

On a visit last Saturday, we found ourselves waiting 45 minutes for a table with a throng of 30-somethings quaffing beer and wine and talking in down-country accents, along with a few locals. (If the wind hadn't been howling, we might have ventured outside to an appealing bonfire that's lit each night the restaurant is open).

Schenk's touch is everywhere: On the walls, where his hand-written commentary on nature and food and biodiversity, hunger and public schools drape the walls; on the floor, where the points of a beautiful inlaid marble compass point to words such as love, hope, forgiveness, joy and remembrance; in the menu, where he writes upbeat "dedications" every weekend; and most of all, in the massive round-topped clay oven he built, which squats at one end like a flaming Buddha in this shrine to upper-crust pizza. It's all like some crazy cross between Up With People and Bread & Puppet, but it certainly works.

For the freezer shelf, American Flatbreads are made in three 12-inch varieties. Last year to meet changing consumer desires for smaller portions for kids or singles, Schenk also began producing three 9-inch varieties such as "Ionian Awakening," which has olives and Vermont feta cheese, red onions and herbs.

The restaurant flatbreads, priced from \$10 to \$16, come in far more varieties, such as roasted tomato salsa or specials such as West Indian chicken with seasoned red peppers, snap peas and scallions. Schenk says the labor-intensive manufacturing process, plus lack of supply and health department rules, prevent using many ingredients on the frozen pizzas that are

used in the restaurant, like the homemade sausage made with locally raised pork.

Wood-fired pizza ovens aren't a novelty anymore, of course, but no one comes close to Schenk's single-minded dedication to making a connection between the food we eat, and the soil and farmers and nature that sustain us.

To his knowledge, no one else makes handmade, wood-fired organic pizzas for the frozen food market. This is hardly surprising once you see what it takes. American Flatbread has two shifts of nine people working each day to meet weekly production, and every single one of those 4,000 flatbreads has to spend 4 to 5 minutes in the lone oven, which is constantly stoked with wood to maintain 700 to 800 degrees.

The fresh restaurant version produces a delicious crust that is flaky and bubbled at the edges and thin under the topping, with just a hint of blackening at the edges. A tasty organic salad and desserts are also on the menu.

American Flatbread's remarkable growth has led Schenk to move to open new manufacturing plants and restaurants in Vermont. He hopes to open a restaurant on the Burlington waterfront coupled with a brew pub, and is searching for a site in central Vermont where he can combine a restaurant with a more efficient manufacturing plant than the one in Waitsfield, which is maxed out.

Two American Flatbread restaurants have also been opened in Amesbury, Mass., and Portland Maine under a licensing agreement with an avid fan of his pizzas. Schenk built the handmade ovens and helped design the restaurants to assure the same quality.

Though his staff and fans consider him a visionary, Schenk is as surprised as anyone that he's been able to ride the huge wave of gourmet specialty foods into freezer cases across the East Coast.

"That was not really our intention... being gourmet. It was to create a good flavorful food that was nutritious and to support organic agriculture," he says. But as time constraints for work and extra-curricular activities have squeezed family dinner time, American

Flatbreads have become an appealing and healthful dinner that dads and moms can feel good about serving, he says.

"It pushes a lot of the right buttons in people's lives," says Schenk.

*(Andrew Nemethy is a free-lance writer from Calais who writes about food and travel.)*

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