George Schenk, the owner of American Flatbread, is a bit of a magician. As a baker, he has perfected the culinary magic of transforming flour, water and yeast into delicious rustic pizzas. As a food purveyor, he has figured out how to transform his four-day-a-week frozen food factories in Waitsfield and Middlebury into popular weekend restaurants in such a way that diners have no idea they are enjoying their salads of organic mesclun on the very spot that, the day before, had been the cheese station on the production line. And as an entrepreneur, he has transformed what he describes as a "bootstrapping operation" into a national enterprise, with licensed outposts on both coasts.

Schenk is also a philosopher and writer who has thought deeply and written prolifically about the nature and purpose of food, sustainable agriculture and the meaning of community. He is a scientist (his college degree is in biology), a self-taught engineer (he designed and built his bread ovens), an artist (his work adorns the company headquarters) and a philanthropist.

Schenk, a trim 51-year-old who typically dresses for work in jeans, work shirts and rugged vests, did not start out his working life as a baker or a businessman. His jobs included environmental researcher, live-in babysitter, carpenter and photographer. Schenk's introduction to the restaurant business came in 1980 when, skiing in Vermont, he joined the staff of a now-defunct Warren eatery... as a dishwasher. One day, the chef asked him if he wanted to learn how to use a knife. "I said sure," Schenk
recalls, smiling. "I figured I already knew how to wash dishes."

It was about this time that three seemingly disparate childhood influences came together: Schenk's Vermont grandmother, Boy Scouts and his childhood home near New Haven, Connecticut. On visits to his grandmother's East Charleston home, Schenk had watched and learned as she cooked on a wood-fired Home Comfort range. As a Scout (he attained the rank of Eagle) he had become adept at campfire cookery. In New Haven, he had tasted the brick-oven pizza for which the city is known.

American Flatbread began as a backyard experiment. In 1985, Schenk invited a colleague to dinner at the home he shares with his wife, Mary (who is also called George, a nickname she was given long before she met Schenk), and wanted to do "something special." Puttering around his yard getting ready for his guests, a fieldstone oven similar to the stone fireplaces he had built as a Scout began to take shape. As a newly minted chef with bread dough rising in his kitchen, Schenk decided to try baking it in his new construction, but he knew that the oven, lacking a door, would not bake a proper loaf. So Schenk "squashed the dough down" and embellished it with garlic, olive oil, fresh herbs from his garden and some grated Asiago cheese.

"We all put it in our mouths at the same time, and all I remember is a chain of smiles," Schenk says. "We all said, 'This is good.'"

Almost immediately, Schenk took the pizza-oven idea to his employers at the time, at Waitsfield's Tucker Hill Lodge, where he worked with nationally acclaimed chef Gary Danko (now in San Francisco), a practitioner of the emerging "New American" cooking. "Gary and I talked a lot about what food means, about what makes food taste good," Schenk says. He spent his evenings baking under the stars at Tucker Hill with his infant daughter Hanna in a knapsack — "just about the prettiest cooking experience I've ever had." In the winter of 1990, he asked a local market to sell frozen flatbreads, and began baking them in moments when the oven wasn't crammed. He put them outside to freeze, boxed them, photocopied a label and took 24 flatbreads, transported in garbage bags, to the store. Schenk had hardly returned to his oven when the store called requesting 110 more pizzas.

"We had to create a production line overnight," Schenk says.

What comes off the production line, for the uninitiated, resembles supermarket frozen pizza in about the same way lumpfish eggs resemble caviar. The basic idea is the same, but there are vast qualitative differences.

American Flatbreads (or just breads, as Schenk calls them) are thin, crispy-but-chewy rounds of dough made of organic wheat that has been milled into white flour and then had the wheat germ restored. They are topped with organic and minimally processed ingredients, and most of them with tomato sauce made in an enormous iron cauldron. Each is made by hand and baked in a huge stone and clay wood-fired oven. One can taste the fire with every bite. Perhaps this is what Schenk means when he says, "The food remembers."

"The food remembers the farmers who grew it, the people who picked it, and the distance it traveled, and how it was treated," he says, peering over rectangle-shaped half-glasses and running a hand through his thinning hair. He believes that food made with love and respect tastes better and is better for you than food that is casually manufactured. He has identified what he calls the "five faces of food": that food should address hunger; that it should be flavorful; that it should be nutritious, that it should nurture those who eat it; and that it should stimulate and promote the body's natural healing processes. On the floor of the restaurant, set in a stone mosaic, are 12 words: Wonder, Hope, Kindness, Patience, Peace, Forgiveness, Gratefulness, Joy, Beauty, Remembrance, Love and Respect.

"These words help me remember what I am doing here," says Schenk. It's not every pizza that comes with a full-blown philosophy.

It is indeed sometimes hard to remember that Schenk is an entrepreneur. But the man who can speak intensely one moment about the "gestalt of the American Flatbread experience" and the "central cosmology" of his work can also, minutes later, address issues like his marketing plan, workers' comp, price points and distribution networks.

By the early 1990s, Schenk — still working out of Tucker Hill — was looking for a more permanent home for his growing business; he found one in an empty stable of the 19th century Lareau Farm Country Inn on Route 100. He

American Flatbread founder George Schenk outside his restaurant in Waitsfield. His flatbreads can be bought in 21 states, and there are American Flatbread restaurants in Middlebury and Burlington. Opposite, Matt Holland at the stone oven.
The menu is simple: the appetizer is an organic salad; entrées consist of a choice of about a dozen flatbreads; desserts — often pie in season, or cookies or brownies — are made by area bakers. The flatbread toppings change from week to week and may include locally made sausage, organic greens, house-cured dried tomatoes, Vermont mozzarella, Asiago or goat cheese, or nitrate-free pepperoni.

A similar American Flatbread factory-cum-restaurant opened in Middlebury in 2002, and a third restaurant is to open in Burlington in May. A flatbread factory in Los Alamitos, California, which will some day also operate as a restaurant, has also been licensed. And a faithful customer from Massachusetts persuaded Schenk to allow him to open restaurants under the name “Flatbread Company” in Amesbury, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; and North Conway, New Hampshire. A fourth Flatbread Company should open in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, this summer and others are planned.

The evolution of American Flatbread has not been without pain. After the move to Lareau Farm in 1992, his oven collapsed. In 1998, a flood swamped the oven room with two feet of water, mud and silt; 100 community volunteers turned out to help reclaim the operation. The most harrowing event occurred in 2002 when an employee, Declan Lyons, was shot to death while working at the outdoor cauldron, and another employee was charged and later acquitted.

“We were torn by how to respond,” says Schenk. The shooting led him to think seriously about violence, loss, crime and punishment. It led him, while mourning the loss of “a respected colleague, gracious friend and truly good neighbor,” to host a benefit bake to raise money for the legal fees of the accused as “he too was a cherished colleague.”

The benefit bakes are an American Flatbread institution; Schenk has held them for dozens of community organizations, including a program to help bring organic foods to public schools. He also donates flatbreads to the pediatric unit at Fletcher Allen Hospital in Burlington on a monthly basis.

“I read an article about how important it is for sick children to consume calories,” says Schenk. “And I started thinking about what I could do to help. I’m not a doctor, a nurse or a social worker. But I do cook.” He calls them Medicine Wheel breads. The hospital, presenting them to the children, calls them pizzas.

“Food is a huge piece of the wellness picture, and a lot of kids are not thrilled by what comes up on the tray,” says Kathy O’Reilly, a child life assistant at the hospital. “It thrills us to be able to offer them something so nutritious that they like.” She said that American Flatbread provides food not just for kids and their families, but that they leave some in the freezer for staff.

Schenk is generous with credit as well. In the course of conversation, he names scores of friends, colleagues and relatives who helped him along the way, including not only accomplished chefs but the father of a college friend who makes the boxes he uses in packaging, bookkeepers, former business partners, suppliers and distributors, an aunt who made great chicken soup and a waiter whose casual remark about how nice it is to see the fire in an oven led Schenk to a major redesign. Not only does the food remember, but so does Schenk.

How to Go

American Flatbread at Lareau Farm, 46 Lareau Road, Waitsfield, [802] 496-8856, www.americanflatbread.com. On Route 100 in Waitsfield about a half mile south of the intersection with Route 17. Open for dining Friday and Saturday 5-9:30 p.m. There are no reservations, but diners can arrive at 4:30 to put their names on a waiting list.

American Flatbread at the Marble Works, 137 Maple Street, Suite 29F, Middlebury, [802] 388-3300. Open for dining Friday and Saturday 5-9:30 p.m.

American Flatbread Burlington Heath, 115 St. Paul Street (across from City Hall Park), [802] 861-2999. The new restaurant, a licensed American Flatbread franchise, opens in mid-May 5-9:30 p.m.; eventually open for lunch.

American Flatbread is available, frozen, in health food and grocery stores east of the Rocky Mountains and in California in six varieties in 12- or 9-inch sizes. Visit www.americanflatbread.com for store locations.