

...an endless banquet

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[aj kinik](#)

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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 08, 2005

Glorious Return: American Flatbread



By last weekend we really were in need of a little getaway, so we got in touch with Kazi and decided to do a daytrip down to Vermont in search of fresh air, New England scenery, artisanal cheese, and a pizza or two. Our route was plotted out based largely around a number of Northern Vermont creameries—Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro, Cabot Creamery in Cabot, and the Vermont Butter and Cheese Co. in Websterville—but the real goal of our little escapade was to get ourselves in close proximity to Waitsfield by around 4:30 in the afternoon so that we could sign ourselves up for a table at American Flatbread. We didn't quite make it to Websterville—we ran out of time—but we made our two other stops on our creamery tour easily (more on this [here](#)), and we had no problem doing what it took to make our rendezvous in Waitsfield. All three of us had been to American Flatbread before and it's safe to say that we'd all had memorable experiences there. We had plenty of incentive to guide us.

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Michelle and I had been to American Flatbread about two and a half years earlier. It was July of the summer of 2003 and we'd set out on a much more "adventurous" daytrip than last weekend's, one that began in Saratoga Springs, NY with a trip to the Saratoga Race Course to play the ponies. Several hours later, after a near-miss on a 44 to 1 longshot (!), lunching at the cantina that catered to the Mexican migrant workers that tend to the thoroughbreds, and a lovely drive up Hwy 4 along the Hudson and then into Vermont, we found our way to American Flatbread on the grounds of the Lareau Farm in the Mad River Valley. It was probably about 6:30 by the time we got to American Flatbread that evening, and we were familiar with the lore that surrounded their pizzas--which is why we'd been trying to make it there "early"--but we definitely weren't prepared for the carnival we found when we got there. We'd taken Hwy 4 all the way to Hwy 100, and the drive got more and more sleepy and more and more photogenic the further we headed north along the 100. But when we made that sharp turn into the dirt driveway that leads down from the 100 to the Lareau Farm we suddenly found more cars than we'd seen since we passed Rutland an hour or two earlier. The parking lot was packed and there was quite the crowd gathered on the porch of the big old refashioned farmhouse, hanging out around a big wood fire in the firepit, traipsing across the meadow behind the farmhouse, and dining in the outdoor seating area. Michelle made her way into the restaurant to add our name to the list and when she came back she announced that there was a three to three and a half hour wait for a table. I said, "Excuse me?" Neither of us had ever heard of such a wait, so we balked for about 30 seconds or so, but then we decided, hey, we came all this way, and it really is a beautiful evening out (because it was, it was the perfect summer evening, warm and humid, with clear skies above and a gorgeous sunset in the works), and we don't have any other place to go to, and, after all, American Flatbread *is* located in a town called Waitsfield, so what the hell. We ordered a couple of beers from the bar inside, brought them out to the porch, fetched a couple of books and the *New York Times* crossword from the car, and settled in to our surroundings. Before we knew it, a couple of hours had passed by, and by that time the sun was setting, the stars started to appear, and the fireflies were joining them over by the meadow. We were absolutely, perfectly relaxed by the time our name got called (a

little earlier than expected, as it turned out), and we moved to our outdoor table and had one of the most memorable meals of the last few years. The food was great, no question about it, but this was one of those meals that was more about the all-around experience than just the food. It had to do with the weather, and the scenery, and the farmhouse, and the kids running across the meadow, and the conversation around the firepit, and the stars, and the fireflies, and the locally and organically grown ingredients used by the kitchen, and the sense of community that filled the air.

This year we talked and talked about going back, especially on another warm summer night, but, sadly, our glorious return to American Flatbread never really materialized. They're only open for dining two nights out of the week—Friday and Saturday—and, between the two of us, we were working both of those days all summer long. Suffice to say, we were overdue for a visit by the time last weekend rolled along.

This time around there was definitely no warm, humid weather, there sure weren't any fireflies, and things at Lareau Farm were quite a bit more subdued than they had been in 2003. We showed up right at 4:30, right at the time that the staff at American Flatbread starts taking names for the evening's dining, and we had no problem getting ourselves put near the top of that list. We hadn't really eaten since we filled up at Cosmo's early in the morning, so we opted to be seated at the first available seating time, 5:30. With an hour to relax, we decided to do a little tramping across the meadow and through the snow. Night was coming on quickly and things were getting pretty dark, but one of the hosts was kind enough to lend us a headlamp (he even went out to his truck to grab it for us!), so off we went.



45 minutes later we ambled up to the firepit, where once again a fire was burning, and we spent 10 minutes or so warming up. Then we went into the farmhouse and ordered three beers at the bar and waited for our name to get called. We got seated right in front of American Flatbread's massive and beautiful wood-burning oven--the perfect position to watch the action as well as to warm up some more after our walk in the woods. The oven occupies the central position in the dining room at American Flatbread--the high vaulted ceiling has the effect of making it look like a kind of altar, fittingly enough. Like everything else at American Flatbread, the oven was made from local ingredients like Vermont fieldstone and soapstone (which is particularly well-suited for evenly distributing heat), but, interestingly, the oven was modeled after the clay-domed ovens that were traditional in rural Quebec in the 18th and 19th centuries. I've come across pictures of these ovens like this one that was featured in *The Art of Eating* No. 69



and places like Au Pied de Cochon here in Montreal incorporate their own modern take on these ovens as part of their charm, but in my travels across Quebec I've yet to come across one as authentic as the one at American Flatbread. On their web site the folks at American Flatbread claim, "These clay domes are considered by many master bakers to make the very best bread." This indicates that there's an entire tradition of bread baking unique to Quebec that was completely extinguished during the push towards modernization. American Flatbread uses only the finest local and organic ingredients in everything that they make, but that oven alone is enough to distinguish their work from that of so many other pizza makers across North America. At the very least you need a well-seasoned oven; American Flatbread's oven is not only well-seasoned, it's also a work of art, a labor of love, and a focus for the sense of community, the commonweal, they've developed over the last couple of decades.

When it came to ordering, we were definitely happy to have Kazi along because it meant that we could order a second pizza and try out another combination or two. On our first visit to American Flatbread we'd tried a

half and half New Vermont Sausage and Punctuated Equilibrium pizza and we absolutely loved it. The New Vermont Sausage pizza was especially deluxe--it featured "Hadley Gaylord's naturally raised Waitsfield pork in a nitrate-free maple-fennel sausage," mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes (dried and prepared on premises), caramelized onions, and a blend of cheeses, and that bright fennel-maple flavor was truly something else. The Punctuated Equilibrium, on the other hand, consisted of Vermont chèvre, red onions, roasted red peppers, black olives, herbs, mozzarella, and garlic--as the name suggests, perfect balance shot through with the pungency of that goat's milk cheese and the brine of the olives. We were so impressed by these two combos and we'd been craving them for so long that we decided that ordering them again was the only possible option. This time around we ordered a full New Vermont Sausage pizza along with a half and half Punctuated Equilibrium and Pepperoni and Peppers pizza. We were intrigued by the thought of having a quality pepperoni pizza (for once), one made with an "all natural nitrate-free pepperoni," and we were pretty sure that each half's Mediterranean vibe would complement the other. How right we were! Our Mediterranean Special was a great match--maybe even too good of a match--and ordering a full New Vermont Sausage was one of the best decisions I've ever been a part of. Halfway through our pizzas we found ourselves gazing over at the woman to the left of the oven with fascination and covetousness in our hearts (Who was she? A reviewer? An heiress?). She was sitting at her table solo with a bottle of red wine and not one, but two pizzas on her table. She had about 4 or 5 pieces of her pizzas, drank most of her bottle of wine, and then waltzed out of the restaurant with the loveliest assortment of leftovers you ever saw. Hmm...

Even the desserts were impressive last Saturday night. Kazi and I split the homemade apple pie with homemade vanilla ice cream and Michelle ordered a double order of *mignardises*, which wound up consisting of two chocolate-covered toffee candies and two chocolate-covered caramel candies. We'd had their excellent apple pie before, but we'd never had their candies and, like everything else, they were both thoughtful and delicious. We accompanied our desserts with two cups of coffee, and it was time to head off into that starry Vermont night and face up to our

drive back to Montreal.

Heading down to Waitsfield, VT for pizza might seem like an awfully long way to go for pizza, but when you take into account the quality of American Flatbread's pies, the sad state of pizza affairs in Montreal, and the fact that even New Yorkers regularly make the trek up to the Mad River Valley solely for one of American Flatbread's justly famous pizzas (!), well, to our minds, it seems perfectly reasonable.

[American Flatbread](#) is located just south of Waitsfield, VT along Hwy 100. They're open for dinner on Friday and Saturday nights. Unless you show up at 4:30 and make a booking for yourself at 5:30, you should be prepared for a healthy (and potentially relaxing) wait. They're only open twice a week and their pizzas are very, very good. You do the math. Waitsfield is about a 3-hour drive from Montreal.

aj

posted by aj kinik @ [12:15 AM](#)

6 Comments:

[Mark Slutsky said...](#)

ok i'm coming with next time you go down there

NO QUESTION

[December 09, 2005](#)

[aj kinik said...](#)

You're on

Now we've just gotta convince Robinson to open up the chalet...

December 11, 2005

Wayne said...

AJ,

American Flatbread is now open in Burlington, right downtown on St. Paul St., opposite City Hall Park.

March 18, 2006

aj kinik said...

Is that place an actual American Flatbread, or do they just serve their pizzas? Either way, we're so enamored with the Waitsfield location--the farmhouse, the setting, that oven--that we'll probably keep going there, even if the Burlington location is more convenient.

March 20, 2006

Megan Duni said...

Hello! We are so excited to have discovered your blog, thanks to our Chef de Cuisine, Jeremy, who creates specials at our Waitsfield location each week. To clarify, Burlington Hearth is a licensed franchise of American Flatbread. George, founder of AF, has shared our recipes and helped build an oven with Burlington Hearth. Like us, they have established a standard menu along with specials that highlight seasonal produce, meats, and artisan cheeses from the Chittenden County community.

Hope to see you all soon, especially now, at the beginning of our precious growing season!

Best regards on behalf of every one at American Flatbread!

Megan

May 23, 2006

aj kinik said...

Wow, so nice to hear from you Megan, so nice to find out we've got readers at AF. We're big fans (as you might have gathered from my post), so it means a lot.

Thanks for filling us in on Burlington Hearth and its relationship to AF. Of course, if I'd just read the AF website more carefully back in December (as I did after we received your comment) it would have been crystal clear a long time ago.

Speaking of your website, it seems like the AF family is in the process of expanding. How is that going? Is that affecting production at the Waitsfield location?

We can't wait to visit again. We're overdue again, I think. Might just have to schedule a visit in the next couple of weeks. Thanks for reading and writing...

May 24, 2006

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