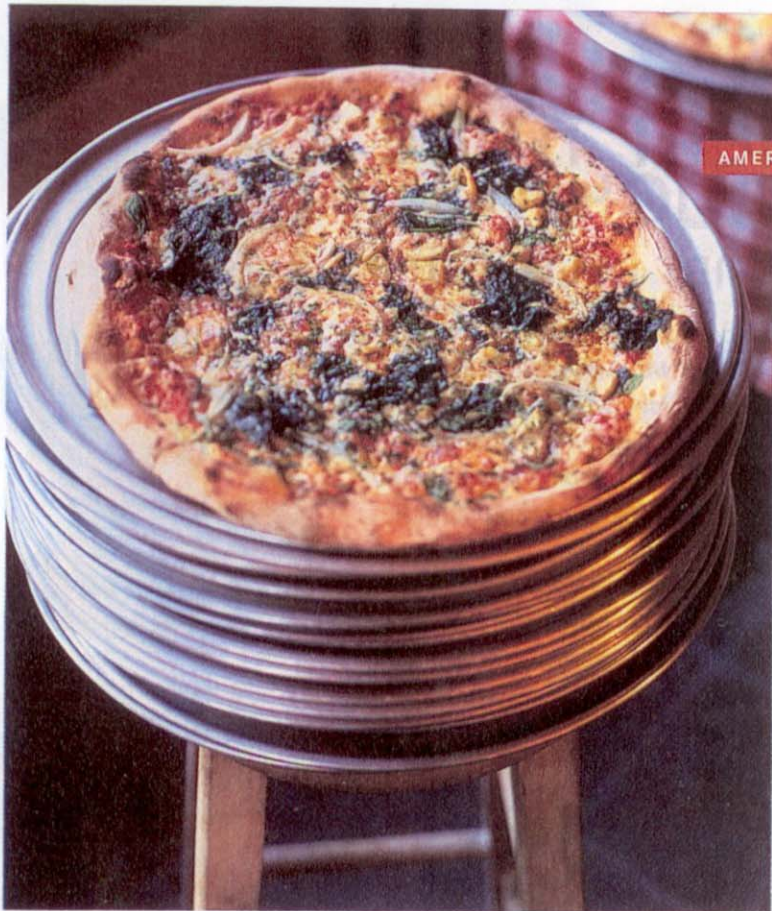


travel



AMERICAN FLATBREAD

People are willing to endure three-hour waits for American Flatbread's pizzas, though the folksy manifestos lining the walls are also part of its charm.



## pizza pilgrimage

CAN ANY PIZZA POSSIBLY JUSTIFY A SEVEN-HOUR DRIVE? ON A WEEKEND TOUR OF VERMONT'S MAD RIVER VALLEY, A TRAVELER LEARNS THE ANSWER IS YES.

DRIVING HALF A DAY IN POUNDING RAIN FOR A PIZZA IS A grand, dramatic—and ridiculous—gesture. It's more ridiculous if you live in New York City, where you can have every permutation of pizza—coal-oven, wood-grilled, stove-griddled—brought to your door. More ridiculous still if the restaurant you're visiting sells its pies in supermarkets.

But American Flatbread seemed to deserve a pilgrimage. It wasn't just the poetic name, its Whitmanesque

overtones matched only by the name of the location, the Mad River Valley in central Vermont. I'd heard about the eccentric owner and the three-hour waits outside for a table. Most of all I'd heard about the pizza—the impeccable crust, the sublime

toppings. This part I'd partially verified by buying a frozen pie at the Whole Foods Market in Manhattan. It was the best frozen pizza I'd ever had—and, at almost \$9, the most expensive one sold there. If American Flatbread could work such wonders with frozen dough, I thought, the real thing must be unbelievable.



The stretch of Route 100 leading up to the restaurant in Waitsfield was quiet and dark. Turning into the driveway, we thought we might have hit the place on a slow night. Then we saw the campfires—two roaring ones with dozens of people milling around, sipping wine. It was like an outdoor party. This is what's missing from New York City pizzerias, Alex said: campfires.

We walked into the restaurant—a low-ceilinged space inside a converted horse barn—and put ourselves on the waiting list. American Flatbread is open only on Friday and Saturday nights and doesn't take reservations, so the lines can be interminable. To pass the time, we asked if we could meet the owner, George Schenk. Wearing beat-up jeans, a khaki vest and a tie, Schenk looked like a slightly rumpled college professor. The former biologist—who launched his food career when he worked with chef Gary Danko at nearby Tucker Hill Inn in 1984—is passionate about wood-fired baking. After an unexpectedly successful attempt to build a stone oven in his backyard for a party, he opened an outdoor pizza stand on the Tucker Hill grounds in 1987 with an oven he'd built from field stones. Schenk soon upgraded to a sturdier, Native American-style one built inside a maple-sapling wigwam before chancing upon an archaic clay model in a library book called *The Bread Ovens of Quebec*. This oven, which Schenk uses at American Flatbread's current site at Lareau Farm, can handle 800-degree temperatures and produces a nicely browned crust with "the perfect crispy-chewy contrast"—Schenk's Platonic ideal.

Schenk takes the same amount of care with his toppings, mostly Vermont-grown organic ingredients: sausage from a pig farm in Waitsfield, shiitake from the Intervale, an experimental farm in Burlington.

When our table was finally ready, the hostess sat us near the oven, so we had a close-up view of the bakers shifting the pizzas in and out with a giant peel. The specials were listed on a chalkboard: one with New England baby clams, capers and the restaurant's



RED HEN BAKING CO.

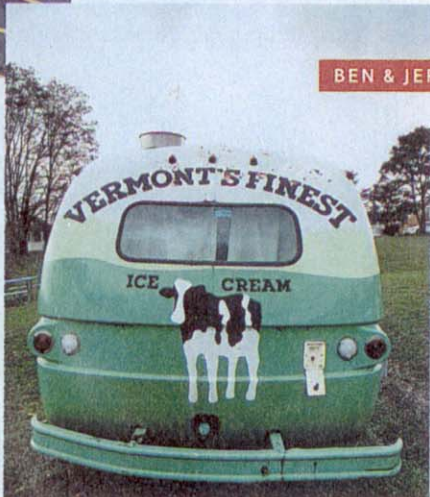
signature wood-fired tomato sauce, and the other with pancetta, oyster mushrooms and herbed Vermont goat cheese. At Schenk's insistence, we ordered both, plus two pizzas from the regular menu—the New Vermont Sausage, with maple-fennel sausage and sun-dried tomatoes, and the Punctuated Equilibrium (named after an obscure theory of evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould's), heaped with olives, roasted red peppers, goat cheese and rosemary.

Part of American Flatbread's genius, no doubt, is making customers wait so long they're ready to eat the furniture. We'd spent the day eating, so we weren't as susceptible. But when the waitress brought our fragrant, bubbling-hot pizzas, we eagerly tore a piece of crust off the edge. The flavor had amazing depth; it tasted like real bread—vibrant with the flavors of organically grown wheat flour, kosher salt and olive oil. And the texture had that elusive contrast Schenk was talking about: crispy on the bottom but doughy enough on top to have a pleasing chewiness. Plus, each topping stood out as if it were starring in its own dish: the briny clams; the maple-sweetened sausage; the crisp, smoky pancetta; the bewitching sauce, made from tangy tomatoes cooked in a wood-fired cauldron.

As we ate, we gazed at the posters on the wall, which Schenk had made himself and which meshed with the restaurant's neo-hippie vibe. "Irrigation and the Death of Civilization," read one. "Irrigation led to the rise of the city-state, and city-states led to slavery..." Next to Alex's chair was a less strident proclamation. "Things Bears Need," it began. "Deep woods, big old trees, berries, solitude." We wanted to steal the poster. Instead, we came up with our own list, with the things we needed to cap off this epic weekend: another game of pool at the Pitcher Inn, a cup of tea by the fire in our room and a peaceful—and dry—drive home in the morning. ■



The Ben & Jerry's ice cream factory, a Vermont landmark, gives out free scoops. The breads at Red Hen Baking Co., TOP, are less famous but also worth a stop.



BEN & JERRY'S