American Flatbread finds success using Vt. farm products

BY SPENCER SMITH

The story of American Flatbread Company is a classic tale of entrepreneurial spirit, a scientific curiosity to learn new skills and a Yankee can-do attitude.

In December 1979, a 27-year-old biologist who did research on gypsy moths and water quality moved from Syracuse, N.Y., to Vermont. George Schenk had loved the state as a child, spending summers here with his mother’s relatives. His immediate plan for that winter was to be a ski bum for four or five months and figure out the next stage of his life.

“I had a sense of where I wanted to be or do things, but not exactly what I wanted to do,” Schenk said.

Schenk came to the Mad River Valley with a little cash in his pocket and a truck loaded with all of his worldly possessions. Today Schenk, founder and sole proprietor of Waitsfield-based American Flatbread Company, anticipates 2006 sales at about $4 million.

On a recent winter day, fat flakes of snow piling in drifts outside his rustic but cozy office, Schenk and his marketing director, Jen Moffroid, discussed the early struggles of the company and the challenges they face today with production centers in Waitsfield and Middlebury plus a growing number of licensees and franchises.

Schenk first learned about the organic food movement as an undergraduate, and before moving to Vermont he raised vegetables, pigs, chickens and turkeys in Syracuse. There he lived in a housing collective where food quality was discussed over every meal. “At the commune the classic question was, ‘Here’s what it was made with, how did it taste?’ Very often the answer was, ‘It tastes like it’s good for us.’”

After working at Sugarbush as a ski slope photographer on straight commission, and babysitting in Waitsfield for room and board,
Schenk got a job washing pots in a pair of Sugarbush restaurants with the same owner. The Gallery and Sam Rupert’s featured classic continental cuisine. There he was exposed to a concept of food in which presentation and taste reigned supreme.

“Developing American Flatbread was really about exploring how we might bridge these two disparate ideas about food,” Schenk explained. “How do we make a truly flavorful, nutritious food at an affordable financial level?”

In the restaurants Schenk enjoyed down-time talking with the chefs about food. Nick Logan taught Schenk how to use a knife. “That cut into my skiing time, but that was all right. My first job was to cut parsley. That job began an unlikely apprenticeship in the culinary arts that was to last about four and a half years.”

Point of fact: fresh organic parsley is a today a key ingredient in all of Schenk's flatbreads.

Lyndon Verklar, now dean of culinary affairs at New England Culinary Institute, followed Nick Logan as chef at Sam Rupert's and became Schenk's next mentor.

The early 1980s was a time of ferment in American cooking. According to Schenk, like most other Americans he hadn’t grown up being exposed to haute cuisine. At the same time, classically trained chefs began to chafe under the heavy sauces of traditional French cooking. “I remember Lyndon Verklar saying he had read an article that constantly eating fancy French food wasn’t something that would guarantee your health.”

This period saw the birth of nouvelle cuisine, a blend of fresh ingredients and lighter sauces, according to Schenk. Alice Waters opened her now famous restaurant, Chez Panisse, in Berkeley which created a buzz in the American fine-food restaurant community.

In 1984 Schenk moved to Tucker Hill Lodge where he continued his apprenticeship with Gary Danko, “who has gone on to be one of the most celebrated chefs in America. Danko introduced this new American cuisine to the Mad River Valley.”

For Schenk, working with Danko was “almost like graduate school. Each day while we did afternoon prep we had this ongoing dialogue about food theory.” Among topics discussed were how they could blend ingredients in nontraditional ways and how they could get better, fresher, cleaner food by buying from local and regional farms.

It was from conversations with Danko that Schenk learned about a resurgence in California of baking bread in wood-fired brick ovens. Hearing this trend, Schenk shared his experience of eating pizzas in his hometown in Connecticut and how superior they were to others, which were baked in coal-fired brick ovens.

During this time, Schenk “had an herb garden at Tucker Hill and at home and brought in fresh herbs every day. It was fascinating to see the effect on the palate of truly fresh ingredients.” He also raised chickens and brought in eggs for the pasta. “One day we opened up one of my eggs next to a commercial egg. The free-range egg glowed. Right then I saw the importance of farming and the role of the farmer in the work of the professional cook.”

Danko returned to California and Schenk took a trip to Europe during the off season. “In France I came across a stone oven up in the Alps. It liberated my thinking about materials. Here in Vermont I had fieldstone for free in my backyard.” And he remembered building a U-shaped stone fireplace as an Eagle Scout.

About six months later Schenk and his wife invited Lyndon and Joanne Verklar over for dinner. “I wanted to pull out all the stops. We had a great meal planned and in the middle of the afternoon I had this idea — let's make some bread. And it dawned on me that maybe this Boy Scout U-shaped fireplace might be adapted into a small, primitive oven. Using rocks in our sideyard it took about an hour. Then I made up some French bread dough.”

The oven didn’t have a door because Schenk didn’t know how to make one, but he built a fire underneath and an area above that for the bread to bake on.

“I reasoned because it didn’t have a door it might not bake a loaf, but a thin flat bread would be less impacted by the cold draft. I’d seen pizza ovens where the door was opened a lot.”

Schenk stretched the dough, brushed on olive oil and topped it with crushed garlic, herbs from his garden and some grated Parmesan-style cheese, and put it into the oven.

“We were standing around, didn’t know if it would bake. It came out of the oven, it looked pretty good, and we sliced it up. I remember the four of us standing there. We simultaneously put it in our mouths and you could see the circle of smiles come out. It was obvious that it was good and fun. The oven was pretty and the process was pleasant.”

During that period, Schenk had become appetizer chef at Tucker Hill Lodge. For an annual event that promoted local restaurants, Taste of the Valley, Zeke Church, owner of Tucker Hill Lodge, asked Schenk to create two entries. Schenk wrote up a proposal “to build an oven on site and make the flatbreads in front of people. Zeke looked up over his glasses and said, ‘Is this going to work?’ I’d done it for four people and here I was proposing to do it for thousands! But I said, ‘Of course it'll work.’”

The oven did work but Schenk still had much to learn. He didn’t have a baker’s peel — the long-handled flat wooden board used to slide pizzas in and out of ovens — so he used an egg spatula.

“And I didn’t have the oven elevated at a comfortable working height, so I was making these on my hands and knees. I remember two older women who came by looking at the process and one said to the other, ‘Look, Harriet. It's a cave man making pizza!’”

The next step for Schenk was to build an oven at Tucker Hill Lodge where they could serve pizza and salad one night during mid-week when business in the restaurant was slow. Within a year the flatbreads sold so well they were baking five nights a week. "There were nights when we baked under the stars and there were nights when it was raining or sleeting. But we forged ahead. It was the most extraordinary professional cooking I’ve ever done.”

By then Schenk was raising his own pigs and making his own sausage. (Today, homemade sausage is a staple of American Flatbread.) “It was powerful to be the professional cook using fresh local ingredients, but also for the farmer to see the food go from an organic living being to this delicious dish.”

Later, David Hartshorn and Gaylord Farm began to supply meat and fresh organic vegetables to
American Flatbread. According to Schenk, local farmers “have done a fantastic job of extending the growing season through greenhouses, cover crops and plastic row cropping.”

Schenk is too busy these days to raise animals or vegetables himself, “but what’s really important is that the ideas continue on that we still buy locally and regionally.”

According to Schenk, American Flatbread buys $750,000 of food every year. “And it’s an opportunity for us to be reinvesting in our own farm community. It’s not only good for them, but I think it’s good for the Vermont landscape and economy.”

According to Moffroid, the marketing director, 40 percent of the raw food American Flatbread buys comes from Vermont. Their mozzarella is supplied from Saputo in Swanton.

But what was the transition from that primitive oven at Tucker Hill to production facilities which operate four days a week turning out 1,500 pizzas a day in Waitsfield and 1,200 a day in Middlebury — for a total of 10,800 a week?

By fall 1989 Schenk saw the oven needed to be rebuilt. He had been using metamorphic schist, rock typical of the area. “It is partly heat stable,” he explained, “but not fully. So as a result of the thermal shock of firing and cooling, the rock was cracking and breaking. I was having to replace the baking stones and roof every six to eight months.”

Doing research at the University of Vermont, Schenk found a book titled, “The Bread Ovens of Quebec.” Soon afterward he and his then-partner Chris Mintz, with the help of local organic farmer Wendy Stetson, built a stone oven with a clay dome. This is essentially the oven design used today at the Waitsfield and Middlebury facilities.

With this larger, sturdier oven in place Schenk began to dream of new possibilities. He got the idea of freezing pizzas to sell in stores, baking them during hours he wasn’t producing for the restaurant. “Tom Mehuron, owner of Mehuron’s Market in Waitsfield, was coming to the restaurant pretty regularly, and I said, ‘Hey Tom, I’ve got this idea for

Within a month Schenk showed up at Mehuron’s store carrying two garbage bags filled with 24 flatbreads. Schenk, new to retail, hadn’t thought about stores needing to receive products in case-boxes. He remembers Tom shaking his head, saying “You have a lot to learn. But OK, I’ll figure out what to do with them.”

Schenk thought this shipment would be good for the week. “But Mehuron called the next day and said they sold out in three hours, (and) said, ‘We need 110 for the weekend.’

Gradually production and distribution expanded, first to the Warren Store, then to Paradise Deli near Sugarbush and Grand Union in Waitsfield. Schenk said “It was becoming clear that if we were ever to grow the wholesale component, we were going to have to find a different home.”

In 1991 Dan and Sue Easley of Lareau Country Farm Inn in Waitsfield responded with interest to Schenk’s inquiries and American Flatbread has leased their barn and a portion of their land ever since.

About that time a violent storm undermined the poorly constructed footings of the oven at Tucker Hill Lodge and it fell down the hill, destroying the clay dome. By then Schenk was “in the midst of a lot of projects at Lareau Farm and decided not to rebuild at Tucker Hill. Instead he opened his own restaurant one night a week at Lareau Farm. The very first night they served 110 customers and soon expanded to two nights a week, establishing the current pattern of production baking four days and serving the public on two evenings, Friday and Saturday.

Schenk is appreciative that so many people helped with the founding of American Flatbread, including Chittenden Bank which loaned the fledgling company its first $20,000. And in the early days, Ben and Jerry’s was willing to take on distribution of the pizzas, which helped jump-start business. American Flatbread now has three commercial distributors and is about to take on a fourth, according to Moffroid.

Moffroid said Schenk shows concern for his employees — that they be well paid and not suffer burn-out. Prep, baking and boxing for freezing involves about 10 workers at a time, but jobs are rotated so almost everybody does all 10 stages of production on one shift.

Employees get all the flatbread they can eat, vacation pay, holidays, a weekly free massage on the clock and, after 10 years on staff, a three-month paid sabbatical.

“George remembers when he was an employee and talks about how they got a lot out of him and sometimes didn’t give him back what he needed,” said Moffroid. “So he’s very conscious about being a good employer.”

Schenk himself said, “I don’t view it as being altruistic. I really do see it as good for the company’s bottom line.”

When asked about quality control now that the company is expanding to licensees and franchises as far away as California, Moffroid said, “that’s something we talk about a lot.” She said people who want to do a flatbread franchise “largely have the same values and guiding principles about food. So their heart’s in the right place. But we also require all franchisees to send their people to our training program. But recipe drift is something we need to be constantly aware of.”

As we walked through snow drifts to the baking facility to observe the production, Schenk, ever committed to local and healthy ingredients, said the company has a call out to the Vermont dairy community for organic mozzarella.

“We buy 2,000 pounds of mozzarella a week but our interest is to move at least some if not all of it to Vermont organic,” he said. “Now there’s a selling opportunity for anybody interested.”