

Communal earth oven in Orange helps to cook up food, foster community

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By **Eunice Lee/The Star-Ledger**

ORANGE — Earth ovens may be uncommon in New Jersey, but the concept is as old as, well, dirt.

To that end, about 40 mudslinging volunteers in Orange got down and dirty over the past two months, using their hands and feet to build a brown mound-like, mosaic-covered structure that this month began serving as an outdoor communal bakery.

One volunteer, Anj Ferrara, says during the oven's construction she could imagine the taste of fresh baked naan and pita bread.

"You can't make those things in a regular oven," says Ferrara, 24. "And they're delicious."

Organized by the nonprofit group HANDS Inc., the small communal oven isn't your average convection job. It's made with layers of clay mixed with mud, sand and straw and is among just a few earth ovens, also known as "cob ovens," that exist in the Garden State for free community use, according to project organizers.

But those organizers are envisioning something beyond tantalizing aromas wafting around Tompkins Street, something even more delectable than the hand-made nourishment that comes from the outdoor oven. They're cooking up a sense of community, a place where the lives of local people are sifted together to make something whole out of varied ingredients.

"It's one of those things that people do privately," Molly Rose Kaufman, a community organizer at HANDS, says of cooking, "so it's really different to make it communal."

Based in Orange, the community-development corporation HANDS does serious work like fixing boarded-up houses to sell to first-time home buyers. The oven is one of its "wackier projects," Kaufman says.



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(L to R) Anj Ferrara of Jersey City; splits wood for burning in the Earth Oven as Dan Richer of Maplewood, a chef at Arturo's in Maplewood, prepares the oven during the baking of bread in an earth oven in Orange.



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Dan Richer of Maplewood, a chef at Arturo's in Maplewood, stokes the fire during the firing and curing phase of the earth oven in Orange.

"It's been a constant adventure in things that we usually don't think about. Like where to get 15 buckets of clay soil," she adds.

The earthen walls are 8 inches thick. Except for the fire brick purchased for the baking surface, which is roughly 2½-by-3 feet, the oven and its supporting structure were made almost entirely of found objects. For instance, part of the wood foundation was salvaged from the abandoned Berg Hat Factory in town and the decorative glass studding the oven's dome came from an art studio next door.

The idea came to executive director Patrick Morrissy from his son Campbell, 24, who likes to

cook and did a stint as a chef. Then Stephen Panasci, a landscape architecture student who is a family friend, started planning and sketching.

As the idea took shape, others with expertise joined, like chef Dan Richer and David Mitsak, aka the Mud Man.

Richer, who co-owns the acclaimed Maplewood eatery Arturo's, came upon the oven while he was next-door at an urban greenhouse. Intrigued, the restaurateur provided the project with know-how about wood-fire ovens.

"It basically encapsulates all aspects of cuisine using one fire," Richer notes. "It would be normal if this was 100 or 200 years ago."

Mitsak, an East Orange resident, has run creative mud-building programs for children in Newark, Montclair and Elizabeth since 2008. He found a construction site in Newark where the group was allowed to haul away 70 gallons of clay-rich mud.

The principle, Richer says, is akin to ancient civilizations where people built fires and maximized their use. A fire inside an earth oven can raise the interior temperature to 950 degrees. The heat then gets absorbed into the mud walls and radiates steadily for hours. Food cooks as the temperature slowly cools.

At an earth oven's hottest, pizzas bake in a matter of minutes, Richer says. Around 700 degrees, vegetables roast



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A Fougasse is seen during the baking of bread in an earth oven in Orange.

and meats are seared. Bread goes in around 500 degrees, while more delicate cakes bake at about 350 degrees.

Richer uses a laser thermometer gun to monitor the temperature at Arturo's two much larger wood-burning ovens, but for the smaller one — call it part of the earth oven's charm — volunteers will simply guesstimate.



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(L to R) Dan Richer of Maplewood, a chef at Arturo's in Maplewood, Fred Shandler, co-owner of Arturo's and volunteer and Anj Ferrara of Jersey City, volunteer, gather round the heat of the fire during the firing and curing phase of the earth oven in Orange.

There are at least two similar earth ovens in the state — in Camden at the Center for Environmental Transformation and at the Princeton-Blairstown Center in Hardwick. The oven in Hardwick is solar-powered and located on a campus, mainly geared toward various student groups and not the general public. The one in Camden, built in 2006, is more like the oven in Orange — open to all with free cooking classes each Friday, says Andrea Ferich, the center— director of sustainability.

In Orange, volunteers like Jessica Mathelier, 23, of Orange, and Gamal Jones, 25, of East Orange, stomped in the muddy mixture that Panasci carefully measured out. As in baking, precision counted. The amount of sand used, for instance,

was critical to prevent cracks by reducing the shrinking and swelling of the oven.

"There is a certain amount of science behind it to make it work properly," says Panasci, of Maplewood, who is getting his master's degree at Temple University. But, he adds, "It's one of those projects that doesn't feel like it when you're doing it."

On a recent rainy Tuesday, Richer and a half dozen others gathered around the oven as Richer built a small fire — one of the final steps to cure the mud. The oven will be lit at least twice a month on Sundays. When it's on, anyone can bring food to bake.

But it doesn't end there: HANDS is hoping the oven is popular enough to fire it up more often. Mathelier looks forward to the time it will be used as a kiln for ceramics. Richer hopes to one day start a bread-baking class.

"Out of that, there's unlimited possibilities about what else can happen," Kaufman says.

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