

The Star: City's not fired up about ovens in parks

Environmental and health concerns must be considered, says official

By: Alan Christie

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More bake ovens in Toronto parks is an idea that just smells right.

But it's easier said than done, apparently.

Every Tuesday, Violetta Cardella, a volunteer baker, gets up early so she can help bake bread in two ovens at Dufferin Grove Park. The bread is brought to the Stonegate farmers' market on Park Lawn Rd. Most of the loaves, with no additives and baked with organic grains, sell for \$4. The sesame bread is \$5.

Cardella not only bakes the bread, she helps sell it. The market is only open one day, Tuesdays, from 4 until 7 p.m. in the tiny parking lot of St. James Anglican Church.

Julia Graham, a community health worker at the Stonegate Community Health Centre, hopes the market can be moved to a larger area in Bell Manor park, about 10 minutes away – complete with a bake oven. She says the Stonegate community is waiting for the City of Toronto to establish a policy on ovens in parks before applying for one.

But Peter Leiss, a supervisor and acting manager in the city's parks and recreation department, says city council has no policy on allowing bread ovens in parks, with the strong suggestion not to expect one.

Approvals are made "on a case-by-case basis," Leiss said in a telephone interview.

A Toronto bylaw bans any construction in city parks without a building permit, and because baking bread obviously involves food preparation, the city's health department also has to approve, he said.

And, there are environmental issues. "Some jurisdictions (such as Montreal) have concerns that burning wood in the ovens adds to pollution."

He said the city must balance pollution, public safety and health concerns before allowing more bread ovens. "And one burned down this year at Christie Pits."

Leiss said he knows of only two applications, one in Withrow Park and another in Sorauren Park.

At Dufferin Grove Park, the construction amounts to two tiny "school houses" where the bread is baked. On a recent afternoon, Anna Bekerman, looking smudged after working

since 6 a.m., was balancing a tray of bread, freshly baked. They were among the 210 loaves she would bake that day.

There are two ovens at Dufferin Grove, located south of Bloor St. opposite Dufferin Mall.

The second one was built because a crack was noticed in the ceiling of the first one and it was thought to be unusable. That diagnosis was wrong – now the larger oven can bake 90 loaves at a time, the small one 24 loaves. It takes about three hours for the ovens to get hot enough to bake the bread. Small pieces of wood and paper are used to fire them.

Last Thursday, hundreds of people strolled through the farmers' market, buying fish, burritos, cheese from sheep milk, fresh venison, ice-cold chocolate drinks and dozens of different organic vegetables. And, of course, the bread.

Bekerman explains that despite no additives, the bread lasts a reasonable length of time because less yeast is used, and more sourdough. A volunteer with CELOS, the Centre for Local Research into Public Space, Bekerman also makes cinnamon buns.

And for \$2, people can make their own pizzas, topping them with the basil and cherry tomatoes grown in the park's garden.

In the kitchens where the dough is prepared, there's plenty of room now but come hockey season (they bake bread year round) the staff and volunteers will be a bit squeezed – they have to make space so the Zamboni can be parked where they normally work.

Alan Christie is a Toronto freelance writer.