



Back to Porter: Changing Lawrence Heights with a pizza oven

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You learn a lot of things making your first pizza in a neighbourhood's first brick community oven on a glorious sunny afternoon under the shade of a grand maple tree.

Cornmeal is key to slipping the uncooked pizza off the paddle. Push the burning wood to the back of the oven with the flat side of the rake, otherwise you'll score the bricks over time. Don't lean in — you'll burn your hair off.

"How will we know when the oven is hot enough?" asks Istanbul Ali, peering through the brick oven's semi-circular opening at a mound of smouldering logs.

Toronto Community Housing workers built the oven on a patch of grass at the centre of Lawrence Heights last fall. A rash of shootings in the neighbourhood that summer had spooked people. Instead of the usual formal community safety meetings, someone suggested Friday night cafes around a bake oven on the corner, where people could informally chat over food and become security in numbers.

The cafes were a huge hit — live Jamaican music, Ethiopian dancers, hamburgers on the barbecue, people lounging on blankets over watermelon slices and Somali coffee. The oven arrived late, but better late than never, and today people have arrived to learn how to use it.

Not Toronto Community Housing staff. No, no. Regular people who live there, such as Shukri Mohamud, who volunteers at the local fruit and vegetable market, and Bill Gordon, who served in World War II as an orderly, and Wellesley Thompson, a consummate gardener who once worked at a commercial bakery, making Greek bread, Italian bread, French bread . . .

“If I have the material, I will start it all again,” he says, rolling out a ball of dough at a nearby table.

I’ve written about community bake ovens a couple of times now. They capture the best of this city, I think — people gathering in a green space to share food and act like neighbours. Unfortunately, there aren’t very many of them, as the city’s parks department has been working out their rules and regulations for years now, worrying about liability and untended fires and insurance and the like.

At the same time, the landlord of the city’s poor in an area with a history of violence has decided to not worry about everything wrong that can happen, and to trust the community to do what’s right. They built it first and will figure out the rules later.

“Be wary of complexity and administration,” community worker Domenic Brizzi says cheerfully. “It blights the process and keeps things from getting done. Give ownership to the grassroots.”

How delightfully laissez-faire. How fraught with potential problems.

Who will get to use it? Who will draft the schedule?

“Where are they going to get the material?” asks Gordon. “Who’s going to do the keeping up of it?”

Toronto Community Housing has ridden reins-free before. The brick building behind us was a truck maintenance shed until a couple years ago, when they converted it into a community centre with kitchen and all. Inside, there’s a plastic calendar on the wall where neighbours can book the main room for baby showers, or wakes, or women’s cooking sessions. Community leaders have the keys to the building. So far, apart from the odd scheduling conflicts, it’s all worked out.

“We have great resources, all these people,” Brizzi says. “The rest is easy.”

There’s a lesson for us all here — to trust one another and take chances. We often get so caught up in the rules, we stop living.

I stand at a plastic table under the maple tree and roll out my little ball of pizza dough. A tiny man with a Bluetooth in his ear tells me he makes the best pastry crust — his mom taught him the recipe. He’ll show me some time.

I spread a little pesto, add some red peppers and mushrooms, tomatoes. Ali’s friend tells me about her father’s bakery in Mogadishu, where her eight brothers started work at 1 every morning making Italian loaves. I didn’t know they cooked Italian bread in Somalia.

I slide the pizza into the oven and step back, almost tripping over a little garden of oregano and parsley Brizzi has planted too close to the

oven.

If I like parsley, a woman says, she'll bring me some. She has tons in her yard.

Then I settle down and have a bite. Delicious. Can life get any better than this?

"When people are making their food together, it's the experience that matters," says Amanda Montgomery, community cooking coordinator with The Stop Community Food Centre, who is running today's training session. "It doesn't have to be perfect. Just enjoyable."

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