

# Breaking Bread in *Community*

Carbondale's Public Oven Proves a "Roll Model"

ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED

Cyclists have been tempted off the straight and narrow bike path that runs just west of Carbondale's Third Street Center by a yeasty, golden aroma wafting on the breeze. Seduced by the scent, they follow their noses to the community bread oven where they receive a warm welcome.

"It's the one place where everyone goes with the intention of sharing," says veteran baker Linda Romero Criswell. "We always make extra."

A baker, writer and quilter, as well as director of the Mount Sopris Historical Society, Criswell is usually at the center of the locals who gather monthly over the summer to share a free community baking day. Their preparations begin 24 hours before dough goes into the oven. That's when a volunteer—one of just eight people who know the process—builds a fire in the brick-and-stone oven's baking chamber.

The blaze crackles all night, glowing behind locked steel doors. Through the wee hours, the volunteer monitors the flame to make sure the wood is burning cleanly. The fire-tender continues to stoke the blaze until about an hour before the bake begins.

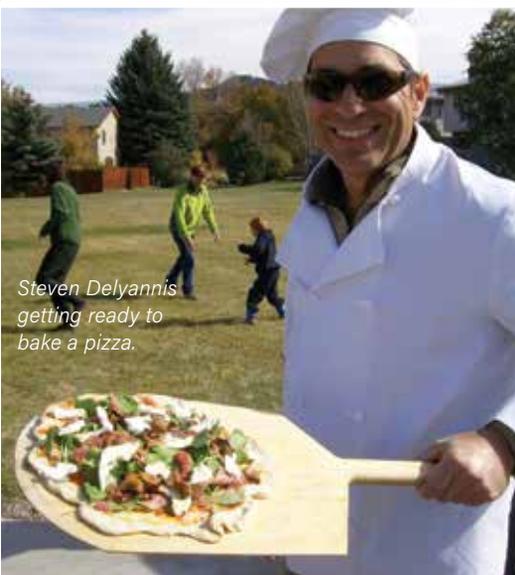
Anywhere from a handful to a couple dozen bakers appear at the appointed hour, bearing dough they have prepared in advance. Aged from six to 85, the bakers have created culinary treats that have ranged from olive, sage and sourdough breads to challah and pizza. Last summer, one baker created a loaf of orange Broncos bread while another crafted desert pizza garnished with chocolate and bananas!

After loaves are loaded into the oven using a long-handled paddle called a peel, the oven's doors are closed for an hour. "Once it's in you can't open the doors," says Criswell. "Getting it right involves a lot of experimentation. We're not the boss; the oven is the boss. There is no sure-fire way of making it work the same way each time."

Criswell, who has been baking for more than 50 years, notes that even flour from the same batch and mill can vary between bakings because its moisture content changes. "Bread is forgiving and there's no one recipe," she explains. "There are many ways to make a good loaf of bread. We learn by making mistakes. What's important is to learn by doing."

What's also important is doing it together. The oven's shining, burnished doors bear a motto that reads, "The flavor of bread shared has no equal." Since the oven can hold up to 16 loaves and retains its heat for hours, multiple batches of bread—including yeast breads, corn breads, breads made with various flours, seeds, cheeses and fruits—can be baked in one day. That leaves plenty of time for the bakers to get to know one another.

The recipe for a successful baking day involves getting the right balance between control and community. "You can't have people opening the oven and peeking in during the bake," says Criswell. "Someone

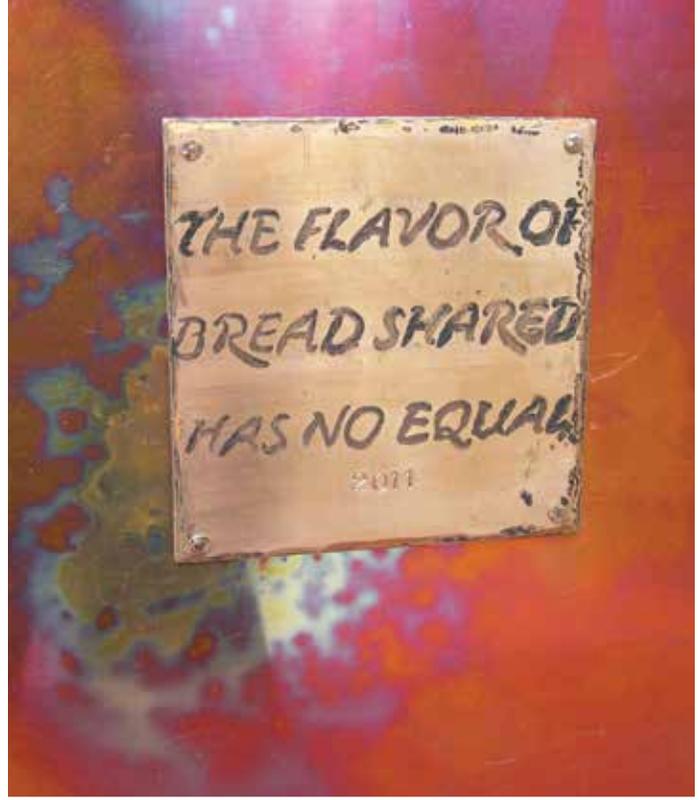


Steven Delyannis getting ready to bake a pizza.



Left to right: Tom Passavant, Karen Glenn, Sean McWilliams, Linda Criswell, Stacy Stein and Larry Tallmadge.





will come along and ask, ‘Can I just stick in my cake?’ On the whole, we have opted for what might be called ‘messy vitality’. We wanted that.”

While building the oven was a community project that involved more than 50 different organizations and 100 volunteers, ask around Carbondale and you’ll be told that Criswell “was the yeast that made this oven rise.” The idea for a community oven was something she mulled over with friends on her deck after cooking at home.

While there are plenty of privately-owned, outdoor brick ovens around the U.S.—Tom Passavant, chapter leader for Slow Food Roaring Fork, had encountered one at a California vineyard and was separately ruminating about building one—*public* ovens are rare. Prior to Carbondale’s oven, there were a handful of community ovens owned by churches and one or two public ovens in far-flung places like Minnesota, New York State and Toronto.

But neither Passavant nor Criswell knew that. After a meeting arranged by mutual friends, the two got busy reaching out and writing grants. In the summer of 2011, the aptly-named Tom Baker, then Carbondale’s town manager, suggested Third Street Center as a site. Soon, the oven began to rise there in Bonnie Fischer Park.

Criswell says that local blacksmith Sean McWilliams, who forged the oven’s handsome doors, was the only person on the construction crew who had had any prior oven-building experience, so he led the project’s design. (Recently, McWilliams also designed a roof to go over the oven.) To build the oven itself, Gallegos Construction, Valley Lumber, Mayne Block, Ben Sellers, Tile by Jacob, the Fireplace Company and dozens of individuals donated time and materials. The BKS Charitable Foundation provided grant funding and Slow Food Roaring Fork contributed in many ways.

Criswell, along with friends Larry and Katie Leonaitis, baked the first official loaves in October 2011.

Since then, Carbondale’s oven has become a model for how to break bread—in community. “People call and visit from all over, looking for advice,” said Criswell. She has fielded calls not only from Fort Collins, Bridgeport and Los Angeles, but also from Peru and Mexico. One group, which hailed from Columbia, made visit plans a full year in advance!

The response that would-be oven builders receive about constructing ovens on public land often proves disappointing. “It’s unusual for an oven to be communal,” says Criswell. “I talked to a New Jersey group that wanted to build a public oven and feed homeless, but their town said no. Our town was so receptive! In our case, the town manager was the one to *suggest* putting the oven on public land!”

The new roof over the oven, supported by a Garfield County Federal Mineral Lease District grant, will create both a picnic area and an outdoor classroom. Elizabeth Cammack, founder of the adjacent Demeter’s Garden, says, “One of the wonderful aspects of a community garden is gathering with fellow gardeners to enjoy the bounty of your hard work. We love potlucks, but... when we join the community bread oven people for gatherings, there is just not enough room. The size of the new shade structure will be more than enough to accommodate everyone comfortably.”

Baking season will begin the first Saturday in March and continue on first Saturdays through the fall. Criswell notes that a growing number of community groups have plans for the oven.

“Everyone is invited,” she says. “No experience necessary. One single dad brought store-bought pizza last summer. We baked it. There is no fee to bake. We just ask that you share a taste of your bread with the group or bring butter, oil, toppings or beverages. Donations are always welcome.”

