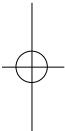


have **oven**
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DON LEWIS HAS A VISION: A serpentine line of people, each holding a piece of cordwood, wait in front of his wood-fired, portable bread oven for a freshly baked loaf of bread. The sign reads "Method of Payment: Cash: USD, Personal Check to Don Lewis, Cord Wood: Local Only."

That vision isn't far from reality. Lewis, 51, has the eye of the tiger. His Wild Hive Farm Bakery operates out of his Clinton Corners home and produces gourmet and home-style breads, biscuits and scones that he sells at the Union Square Greenmarket in New York and to food-buying groups and markets around Dutchess County. Eighty percent of the organic ingredients used in the bakery's products are harvested in the Dutchess County area.

Baking with locally grown, locally milled grain is the driving force behind Lewis's sustainable agriculture mantra—building a consumer base for small, local farms and keeping them economically viable.

Distributing a purely local product is where the portable oven comes in. This nearly completed "bakery on wheels" will travel to local festivals and markets where hot loaves will pop out of the oven and into the hands of consumers, ratcheting up the meaning of "fresh." For Lewis, the portable oven concept pushes the marketing envelope by creating an independent, non-commercial enterprise that offers freshly baked goods on the spot in a number of different locations.

Lewis collaborated with local artist-welder Fletcher Coddington to create and build the oven. Made from sanitized, recycled oil drums and based on a 20-foot-long trailer, the oven has two masonry hearths and stands 7 feet tall and 10 feet long with a towering, 12-foot smokestack. The cooker already has a commanding presence. The wood-fired oven has an elaborate air-damping system to control the cooking temperature. It will produce 60 to 80 loaves of bread anywhere, anytime.

"We will make the dough ahead of time, process it, chill it and then bake it on site—wherever we go," Lewis says. "Our preference is to be at festivals with 1,000 to 5,000 people who are agriculturally oriented. That's where our clientele will be."

Lewis, a baker for more than 20 years, started out as a commercial beekeeper, selling honey and bee byproducts at greenmarkets. He learned beekeeping and fish farming on a kibbutz in Galilee, Israel, after he got out of high school. He and his wife, Dale (now a registered nurse), baked together



as he segued from beekeeping to baking while raising his two children.

In the mid-1980s, Lewis started baking commercially and expanded to a larger operation in Poughkeepsie. He created his own niche using innovative combinations of herbs, cheeses and vegetables in gourmet-style and home-style breads, which put him ahead of the curve. "I was just trying to make a living as a baker, with no sustainable aspects to it at all," says Lewis. "We worked seven days a week, did three markets a week and sold wholesale. I had 12 people in production and four salespeople. I was just doing reactive marketing."

Still, Lewis was struggling economically after about five years. He closed the Poughkeepsie bakery, scaled back his operation and sold bread at only one market a week in New York City. In the early 1990s, he revamped his business and was able to hire back some of his bakers.

"It was sometime in the mid-1990s that I bumped into the 'good ingredients' and realized that this is what's special," Lewis recalls. He had discovered a source of local grains. "A local farmer was growing grain and milling flour for himself—his wife would make bread with the flour," Lewis says. "He offered me some flour to see what I could

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do with it—I stuck my hands in it and that was it.”

Today, Wild Hive Farm Bakery offers assorted sourdough breads, rolls, biscuits and scones. His products include Roggenbrot, Irish soda bread, rosemary garlic sourdough, raisin walnut multigrain, Tuscan olive bread, challah, brioche, smoked cheddar biscuits and raisin scones. Lewis says his bakery will soon own and operate a dedicated grain mill that will process about 100 pounds of flour an hour. The resulting baked goods will thus be made from 100 percent local flour, he says, completing the cycle of sustainable bread making.

“Commercial flour is terrible—the industry has been producing poor quality flour in this country for almost 50 years,” Lewis claims. “The time lapse that occurs from harvest to when it gets to the mill is the first problem.”

Lewis explains that commodity brokers play the supply-and-demand game by holding grain in storage to drive the price up. (Generally, grain is held from harvest until the following spring, when it is released to the mills.) “Then the grain is 20 percent ‘dead,’ which means that, ultimately, 20 percent of the flour is rancid,” Lewis says. “The germination rate drops, which means it dies either because of oxidation or heat. Flour, once it’s milled, breaks down and loses most of its nutritional content within a couple of weeks.”

According to Lewis, commercial mills remove beneficial vitamins, minerals and protein by extracting the bran from the flour and “enriching” it with added vitamins and minerals. In addition, bleaching “is a problem,” says Lewis about what he considers problematic impurities in commercial bread. “I think that’s why so many people suffer from allergies like gluten intolerance. For the last 40 or 50 years, people have been raised on this [enriched flour]—the busiest bakery in the county gets this flour. When the mill ships it, it’s rarely under two months old.”

Providing a quality product directly to the consumer is the ultimate goal of sustainable agriculture, Lewis emphasizes. “When I realized that I had the ability to make good bread available to the consumer, that’s when it struck me that this is really important and really a great thing to do,” he says.

Although it wasn’t called “sustainable” at the time, Lewis grew up with sustainable practices in his own home. His father, a chicken farmer in Middletown, later went into the barbeque business and eventually into catering. “My father always used local ingredients for his business,” Lewis remembers. “Corn and tomatoes came from local farms—it was his way of doing it. It wasn’t until later that I realized that he took the fundamentals of sustainable agriculture right into his restaurant.”

Closing the gap between consumer and farmer is the bigger picture of sustainable agriculture. “Farmers go through tremendous amount of work to produce the food—but to market the food is another whole job, another whole life,” he says. “A farmer, in order to get the food from the ground to the consumer, relies on marketing in order to make a living.” Lewis is especially interested in efforts like community supported agriculture (CSA). “The CSA movement is one of the most fabulous things because of direct marketing. The consumer pays the farmer in the spring—that’s a wonderful format,” he says.

Lewis is protective—almost paternal—about his small network of local farms. He worries about their survival against the agri-business industry.

Lightning Tree Farm in Mabbettsville supplies the grain for Wild Hive Farm bread. Area farms tapped by Lewis for various ingredients include Knoll Krest, Berried Treasures, Ronnybrook, Gorzynski, D&J Organic, Euphrates, Keith’s Farm, Migliorelli, Sisters Hill and Ryder. Most ingredients are organic; the onions, eggs, honey, shiitake mushrooms and tomatoes come directly from Wild Hive Farm.

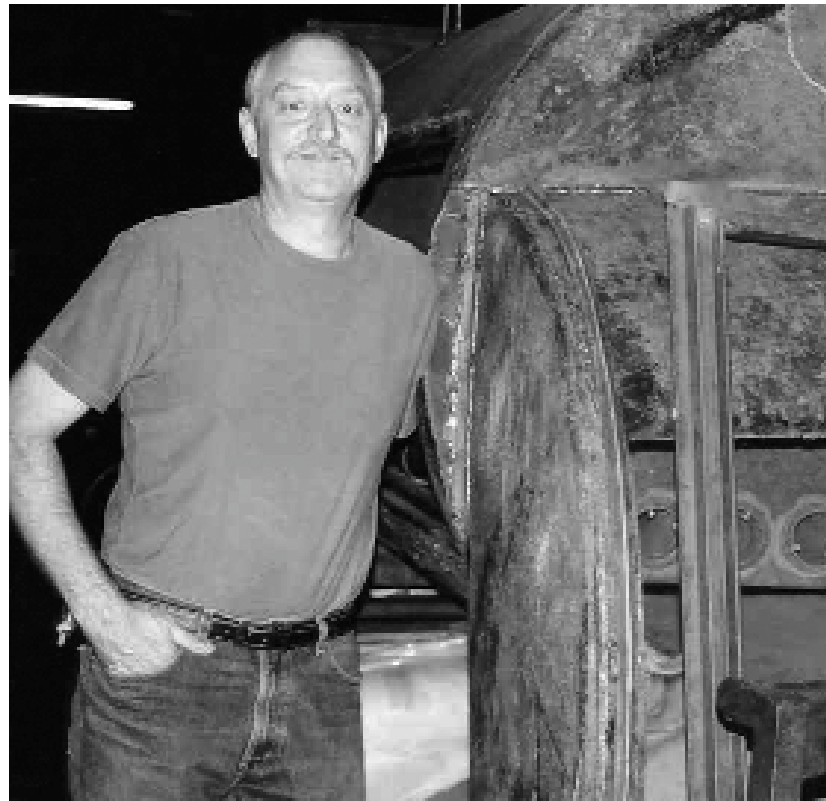
More and more farmers count on income from seasonal farmer's markets in a growing number of towns, but Lewis sees an emerging farm-market trend that's less "local and fresh" and more focused on "agro-tourism," with an accent on what he calls ambience. "Many of the small towns gave up the farmers' market concept of sustainable agriculture for something that is more quaint," he says. "The towns organizing these markets do it [for] tourism. If you look at product lines and the controls used to balance commodities at these markets, you start to see it becoming a little *chic*—the trendy products get the space rather than a farmer with a sustainable product. It takes away from the sincerity of sustainability." The big greenmarket trend embraces larger, corporate bakeries that edge out the small-farm bakeries needed to subsidize a farmer's income, says Lewis.

The portable oven is one way Lewis hopes to be able to maintain his own independence while raising the bar on how baked goods are sold. "I expect copycats along the way, no doubt about it," Lewis admits. "Maybe in 10 years there will be a bunch of people running around with portable ovens and there might be a few more people milling their own flour. I'm not that concerned with competition. On the other hand, competition would be a great thing for sustainable agriculture, and the best thing for the consumer."

Lewis (who still keeps bees, raises chickens, grows shiitake mushrooms, herbs and vegetables) concedes that, as a farmer, he probably could feed several hundred families, he notes, but "I'm doing more right now by connecting more farms with more consumers and contributing to sustainable agriculture. That's what makes me tick."

The concept of a traveling bread oven allows Lewis to create a spontaneous market for a specific day, which is his personal prescription for a free economy. "Capitalism is all about making money independently," he says, emphasizing that too many enterprises are owned by too few corporations. The result is that "Corporations are not offering enough choices for people. The bigger they get, the smaller the choices. Freedom of choice is what this country was built on and when you take it away from the food we eat, you are taking away the main staple of life. I feel there needs to be options," he says.

And choices there will be if all goes as planned. By next spring, when Lewis's portable oven will appear at festivals, fresh-baked bread will not be the only item cooked on site.



In a separate, higher oven, turkeys, large chickens and pork will be roasting or smoking as well.

"The oven is very flexible," Lewis says. "We will roast organic meat and then provide bread for sandwiches with whatever salad or toppings are seasonal. It will also be a portable food resource center, with a demo table out in front showing how to grind grain into flour." Lewis holds that he will barter wood for bread, especially if it is from nearby Stissing Mountain. "I would donate bread to an organization if they can supply the wood," he says. "I'll take [enough] local hardwood needed to establish an exchange. I'm open to that and I plan on going there."

Solar-powered applications to the traveling bakery are a future possibility, says Lewis, who is designing ways to run a water pump and small lights from portable solar panels.

Lewis emphasizes he is trying to redefine a sense of economic stability that would be impervious to a national industry that has wrested nutritious baked goods from its public. About 100 years ago, there were hundreds of grain mills dotting New York streams and rivers, grinding out flour for neighbors and for barter. "That was the way of life: The grains were grown here, they were milled here, they were baked here and they were sold here. That was true sustainable agriculture," says Lewis. "I am trying to make a point that it can be done." ❖

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