

# Bakers' Square

Hubbard Hall's communal bread oven revives a Quebecois tradition in the heart of Cambridge's ongoing cultural renaissance

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On a bright, warm September Sunday, people stroll and shop amid the ring of tents and vendors that constitute the farmers market in the park behind Hubbard Hall in Cambridge. Some of them wander over to the bread oven to order pizza from Lisa and Scott Carrino. The proprietors of the Round House Bakery at Pompanuck Farm bring baked goods to this weekly market, and every other week they make pizza to order in the wood-fired bread oven in the redeveloped freight-yard complex turned community center where the market is held. Once the last pizza is baked, Scott bakes up a little leftover pizza dough.



Photo by Heather Coton.

Another group is already assembled at nearby picnic tables, getting ready to use the oven for a potluck pizza bake as part of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York Locavore Challenge. They grind wheat that was grown in the Hudson Valley at Lightning Tree Farm, squatting to put their shoulders into pushing the small hand grinder that longtime Cambridge resident Bliss McIntosh brought from home. McIntosh makes a froth of yeast and water, and adds it to flour—some fresh-ground, some bought already milled at the Cambridge Food Co-op on Main Street—to make a nice mound of dough. After the first rise, she shapes the dough into 20 balls and lets them rise again. She builds another fire in the oven, which is freestanding and made of clay. The fire burns behind a set of interlocking iron doors. After a set amount of time—an amount she and other bakers have learned in the three years they've been using the communal oven—she rakes the coals from the oven deck into a Weber grill. She'll allow the heat in the oven to equalize before she slips the first pizza into the heat on a long wooden peel.

The Cambridge Bread Oven was built in 2008 as part of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City. The celebration stateside included a cultural exchange as Quebecois musicians, dancers and craftspeople traveled to Vermont, Rhode Island and New York to salute their history and tradition. This site in the Cambridge freight yard was determined to be suitable for building—and keeping—a traditional Quebec-style bread oven.

The project came together through the work of many players, among them Todd DeGarmo of the Folklife Center at the Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls, and Winnie Lambrecht, who at the time was working in folk arts at the Rhode Island State Council of the Arts. Lambrecht worked with a number of partners coordinating events. An arts organization in Quebec had a bread-oven craftsman, Jean LaBerge, who was willing to travel and practice his craft. Once DeGarmo identified Cambridge as a potential location, and Hubbard Hall director Benjie White proved a willing and supportive partner, Lambrecht was thrilled.

Community bread ovens, Lambrecht says, used to be a gathering place in rural Quebec villages. “If people couldn’t afford to build [ovens] in their own houses, there was also a communal one next to the church,” she explains. “So people used to bake their breads on Saturday night, and at the end of the baking the oven was still hot. They would put their bean pots in there. When they came to church on Sunday, they would retrieve their bean pot, and the beans would be cooked in the residual heat from the oven. It was a ubiquitous part of life in Quebec.”



Photo by Heather Croton.

These ovens are now experiencing a revival in the province and beyond as people get interested in regional history and traditions of bread baking. In Quebec, many such ovens were in use until fairly recently; some say until the end of World War II, others say into the 1950s.

The oven in Cambridge is another addition to the redevelopment of the historic freight yard into a vital community space behind Hubbard Hall. “The whole freight-yard development took incredible planning,” says Hubbard Hall’s Benjie White. “The only part of it that was not part of the plan is the bread oven, and the bread oven is a touch that fits in here in a way that just tickles me.”

The fact that the village never lost its architecture—the historic Hubbard Hall opera house, the elegant passenger depot and agricultural freight buildings—is lucky. The fact that the small community had the initiative to carry out such large-scale revitalization is remarkable. Cambridge seems a model for integrating historic resources into contemporary use. Witness the expanded Battenkill Books facing Main Street, and an alternative energy business, E-Green Solar, adjacent to the piece of functional Quebecois history that is the bread oven.

The communal bread oven is in regular use by a number of different groups. A core of bakers e-mail each other when they want to bake—it’s not efficient for one person to bake, so once a critical mass is gathered, people pick a time to bake and a fire tender volunteers.

McIntosh often tends that fire. She likes hanging around, whatever the weather, while the oven heats. “If you light the fire and you’re stuck there for four hours, people come and chat, or we play a lot of music or you’re there by yourself staring at the fire, which is nice,” she says. “I’ve been down there on cold winter mornings just sitting and looking at the fire and it’s really nice.”

Everyone involved with Hubbard Hall, the freight yard and the oven is careful to make sure that anybody who uses the oven is properly trained. The heating requires a three-and-a-half to four-hour fire and a lot of firewood. The tender needs to be watching it all the time.

The potluck pizza that happened the last day in September was part of a regular event, the dinner warm-up to a monthly contra dance. The oven is also used for Hubbard Hall events, like dinner on opening night of a show, or occasionally, for the organization's board meetings. A caterer uses it for her family the day after Thanksgiving. The e-mail list that schedules the oven use includes anyone who wants to sign on, and people show up out of the blue who have no other relationship to the village.

This Sunday (Oct. 23), the Curiosity Forum and the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library will partner with the Hubbard Hall Community Bread Oven to celebrate the oven's construction and history. Events start at 3 PM with the premiere of a documentary about the building of the oven, *Baking Bread!* Lambrecht made the film, and she'll be on hand to answer questions. The event is free, and anyone can stay for the bread bake afterward, the pizza potluck dinner at 5, and the 6 PM contra dance, too.

"The building of the oven was so inclusive," McIntosh says. "Anybody could come and trample and hop in or knead some clay for a while and actually be really helping and be really a part of it."