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GATHERING SPOTS | APRIL 29, 2010, 7:29 P.M. ET

The Pies that Bind

The Buzzelli family bonds over pizza-making, and eating, in their Virginia home's remodeled kitchen, featuring a lovely wood-fired brick oven.

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By ARNESA A. HOWELL



Eli Meir Kaplan

One of Mr. Buzzelli's creations cooking in the oven.

SOMERSET, VA. -- The flames cast an amber glow against the shiny lacquered cabinets as Tony Buzzelli stokes the fire of the wood-burning pizza oven in the kitchen's far corner. He picks up the infrared thermometer and points it at the oven's chamber, gazing at the temperature as his son, Joe, walks over to peer at the gadget with him. "It's up to over 870 degrees. It has to come down like 100 degrees," the elder Buzzelli announces to the rest of his family, gathered just steps away.

The kitchen sits at the heart of the Buzzellis' home, an airy 4,500-square-foot country retreat nestled in the woods of Orange County, Va., outside Charlottesville. They spend hours there gathered near the stone pizza oven, cooking, talking and bonding over foods true to their Italian ancestry.

Tour the House



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Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

See photos of the Buzzelli's home and kitchen.

Marta Buzzelli says she got in touch with her Italian side (her grandparents are from Italy) after meeting her husband—the son of an Italian immigrant—who grew up in a predominately Italian neighborhood in Pittsburgh where food united family. "There was always Sunday pasta, Friday night pasta and sometimes during-the-week pasta," Mr. Buzzelli remembers fondly.

On this particular Saturday, the Buzzellis form a pizza assembly line around the limestone

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she made earlier into 8-inch circles; daughter Susan, 31, slices the fresh mozzarella and doles out black olives alongside boyfriend Timo; and Joe, 28, chops mushrooms and quips with his sister: "Her job is to take the job I'm given."

Mr. Buzzelli slides a creation with homemade pesto into the oven; it emerges two minutes later—Joe swiftly cuts the crisp crust into neat triangles. Hands reach from every direction until the plate is clean.

Your Favorite Room? >

Gathering Spots is a new column from WSJ.com looking at that one room in the home where everyone hangs out. Where does your family like to gather? Send your photos to YourPhotos@wsj.com. We will run our favorites in an upcoming column.

The Buzzellis fire up the oven at least once a week, serving up everything from chicken in a brick and vegetable casseroles to fish and pork tenderloin. But pizza is the favored fare—and Mr. Buzzelli the appointed pizza chef—especially when the kids visit from out of town.

When they bought the \$1.7 million home in March 2006, the couple was captivated by its open floor plan and serene setting on 85 acres with scenic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. A passionate cook, Ms. Buzzelli wanted the tiny, traditional galley kitchen expanded and reconfigured to suit her taste—clean lines, a more open design, windows to bring the outside in and a consistent palate that included wood beams and heart of pine floors.

Completed in September 2008, the kitchen renovation cost more than \$150,000. The couple spent about \$6,800 on the oven, which is encased in a custom-designed, natural stone cylindrical chimney soaring more than 27 feet and housing two fireplaces—one on the patio side and the other facing the sunken living room.



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ETI Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

Bustling about the kitchen, from left, Marta Buzzelli, daughter Susan Buzzelli, son Joe Buzzelli and Susan's boyfriend Timo Tonassi and Tony Buzzelli

The beauty of an interior and exterior fireplace is that it brings in the outdoors, a concept mirrored throughout the kitchen's design with the light reflecting, high-gloss custom cabinetry and muted gray-green backsplash that picks up the colors of the home's natural surroundings, says Ann Unal, the designer who planned the soft contemporary space, which also includes a hideaway breakfast center and knobless induction oven.

Still, the collaborative project did present some design challenges, say architects John Rhett and Stuart Madany, including

determining the best height for the pizza oven. Mr. Buzzelli is 6 foot 4; Ms. Buzzelli is 5 foot 1. They settled on 46 inches. "Tony being the pizza chef, we went with the height he was most comfortable with," explains Mr. Rhett, owner of Rhett Architects in Charlottesville.

Costs for wood-fired ovens range from \$2,500 for a do-it-yourself kit to between \$6,000 and \$10,000 for fully assembled ones, says John Thess, the general manager of wood-fired oven importer Mugnaini in Watsonville, Calif. "Some clients turn them into art projects, using our ovens as mediums for expressing themselves," he says of the Tuscan-made ovens, most popular in outdoor living spaces, but often installed indoors. There are even mobile varieties.

The idea for a pizza oven had been percolating in Ms. Buzzelli's mind since meeting a couple some 10 years ago who'd bought one at retirement.

"We were like, 'That's really cool,'" recalls Ms. Buzzelli, 60, a homemaker and mom of three. Over the years she's joked with her husband that he should pick up pizza-making as a hobby when he retired. Although he'd never really cooked before, he was game.

Mr. Buzzelli even took a couple of classes offered by Mugnaini, learning how to build the oven's fire and, with his wife, how to use the oven to make things besides pizza.

Last September, the family held a cooking contest modeled after "Iron Chef," the popular Japanese television show in which two chefs battle each other to create a five-course meal using a secret ingredient. The Buzzellis' secret ingredient: pumpkin. Susan, Joe and Timo vied for the title best cook, with Ms. Buzzelli's mother, Luise, and eldest daughter, Anne, as judges. Joe whipped up pumpkin seed pesto; Susan made penne with pumpkin sauce. Timo took top honors for his skewered pumpkin gnocchi served on a bed of arugula.

Mr. Buzzelli, 61, is retiring next year as a regional managing partner at Deloitte and is settling into his role as boss of the pizza oven, only charring the occasional pie. He's already implemented one steadfast rule: "We will never, ever put pineapple on pizza. They don't have pineapple in Italy."

This is the couple's 12th home in 38 years. Each time, they've moved—for job transfers or to upsize—the kitchen was never quite right. Ms. Buzzelli plops another dough ball on the island countertop as her family bustles around her, and smiles. "I knew that this was my last kitchen. This is my last shot," she says. "I always wanted a kitchen where I wasn't isolated from the whole party."

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