

Colonial oven still makes a crust



Paul Sanders with the magnificent 135-year-old wood-fired oven that he returned to working order for his Dunkeld cafe.

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[/dropcap]hen **Paul Sanders** and his wife **Pauline Yule** moved into an abandoned bakery in **Dunkeld**, they had no intention of doing anything with the clapped-out, 135-year-old oven that dominated one wall of their bedroom.

In fact when they first bought the Martin St property in 2001, the cast-iron wall oven and firebox were hidden behind workshop shelving. They removed the shelving and converted the whole space into a bedroom, before converting it again into a meditation space as part of their business operating a spiritual retreat: a curtain was draped across the oven to avoid distracting the meditators.

It was only in 2010 when they thought about selling the property that the pair learnt the wood-fired oven might be an under-appreciated gem.

“We had a guy come through from Melbourne who was interested in buying the place as a bakery...we called some wood-fired bakers and soon got a sense that maybe the oven was actually in good nick,” Paul said.



The Martin St building has become a favourite among travellers since opening as a cafe last year.

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[/dropcap]he last bakery to operate from the building closed in 1976 when the major bread companies began to buy up country bakeries with the intention of closing them down. As part of the deal, the ovens were supposed to be destroyed.

“But the baker who had this place, Ian McKernan, said he just couldn’t do it, so the oven survived,” Paul said.

Paul and Pauline stayed on and turned the property into accommodation and a gallery, while, behind the scenes, they

worked on bringing the oven back to life.

“We fired it up with a fire in it every day for six months and it began to drip tears – it started to cry – as all the moisture that had built up over the years started to come out,” Paul said.

The external thermometer, that also dated back to 1878, also needed a bit of tweaking.

“We worked out that 300 degrees was actually zero and went from there,” Paul said with a laugh.



After more than a century of taking the heat, the temperature gauge was a little out.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] B
[/dropcap]y 2012, the pair had decided to expand the business

into a cafe and freshly baked bread, of course, would be a house specialty.

“We tried with (dry) yeast bread at first and it got a bit hairy at a times with black, smelly smoke filling the cafe,” Paul recalls, chuckling.

After weeks of trial and error, the quirks and mysteries of the oven began to be solved, and Paul felt ready to expand into baking wood-fired sourdough bread – made from scratch – that would give the cafe a real point of difference.

There was only one catch: he didn’t know how to make it.



Paul Sanders and Pauline Yule ran several businesses from the old Dunkeld bakery before returning it to its roots.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] T
[/dropcap]he first step was to import a quality leaven ('starter') from San Francisco and then enlist the help of a professional sourdough baker who spent a week in Dunkeld showing Paul the process. Paul also hired a baker, Gurwinder Singh, to take over the bread making.

Despite their best efforts, however, the first sourdoughs they made on their own kept falling flat.

“We couldn’t work out what we were doing wrong and kept calling up people for advice, but in the end it was our local yoga teacher here, Frank Jess, who turned out to be the best help,” Paul said.

Frank suggested adding more water to the mix – “we weren’t hydrating it enough” – and making sure the oven was super hot.

“We made our first perfect loaf in May last year and haven’t lost a loaf since,” Paul said with an element of pride.

The oven is capable of baking 300 loaves at a time, but Paul is happy to put through 250-300 loaves a week, most of which are sold at local farmers markets.

For a 135-year-old oven, it’s not a bad way to make a crust.

[box] The Old Bakery & Wild Plum Cafe, 97 Martin St, Dunkeld is open seven days, 9am -5pm. P: 5577 2663. The sourdough bread is available from farmers markets including Port Fairy, Ararat, Hamilton and Daylesford. Paul and Pauline have just listed their business for sale. [/box]



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