

## Playing with Fire

Chef Peter de Jong brings an old-world tradition to residential kitchen design

by **ABIGAIL STONE** photography courtesy of **FIERO CASA**



**ABOVE:** The Solfatara, inspired by the dormant volcano, in production in Italy. **BELOW:** Chef and Fiero Casa founder Peter de Jong preparing a culinary delight using a Fiero Casa oven.

**THERE'S SOMETHING** primal about a wood fire that brings people together. Even more so when food—especially pizza—is involved. Which explains why pizza ovens are an increasingly integral part of backyard kitchen design. “If you’re going to install a pizza oven, it should be beautiful,” postulates Peter de Jong, founder of Fiero Casa. Known for manufacturing beautiful and powerful wood-fired ovens, their upside-down funnel design, with its refractory interior, quickly reaches and retains the high heat required for cooking a perfect pizza or creating the crisp crust that’s the hallmark of a great steak.

De Jong didn’t start out building pizza ovens. He began his career as a master pastry chef in the Netherlands and then—after moving to the States—opened a European-style bakery in New York, where he segued into transforming failing restaurants into profitable ones. He went on to open the world-renowned Beaufort Inn in South Carolina, where he appeared on the Discovery Channel’s *Great Chefs of the South* television series. But the restaurant world’s upside-down hours clashed with family life. “My wife suggested I try something else,” he shares. De Jong embarked upon a sabbatical in Europe that proved to be transformative. A blacksmith taught him to forge metal, masons instructed him on the intricacies of stone, and in Italy he was schooled on wood-fired ovens. “I would just drive around the countryside and see guys building houses out of rocks, which is something





**ABOVE:** Inspired by the Etna volcano located on the island of Sicily, the Etna oven is hand-built in the Italian hearth style.

**BELOW:** The Etna oven can be used for both interior and exterior use and features a dome facade with a steel semicircle.



that you cannot go to school for because there are no schools where they build houses out of rocks,” he recalls. “But these guys learn from their fathers and families to build by hand. There were these really artisanal traits that I had access to while there, which were fun for me to explore.”

Upon returning to the States, de Jong and his family landed in Healdsburg, California, where he put his newfound skills to work by building outdoor kitchens for wineries and high-end restaurants. “We’re talking 20 years ago,” he remembers. “Wood-fired cooking was really not a thing yet. It was a new concept and it was an exciting time to introduce this to people.”

A decade ago, when traveling between Europe, where they own property, and the West Coast proved exhausting, the family relocated to upstate New York, where de Jong began tinkering in his garage. “I wanted to create an oven that was more substantial than anything available here,” he explains. “Basically, 12 years ago, I started building mobile ovens that people can take out to their catering functions.” And Fiero Casa was born.

Originally created for the commercial market—five of the top 50 pizzerias in the world use a Fiero oven—there are now nine models designed specifically for home use; there’s also an entire range of accessories. “During COVID I designed a line of residential ovens that I thought would fulfill a niche in the market for people who truly want to enjoy wood-fired cooking.”

The key to their consistent temperatures, de Jong explains, is a refractory interior that’s made from a balance of alumina, silica, natural stone materials and other assorted minerals in a very precise blend. “Our ovens are designed such that they heat up tremendously quickly and they maintain their heat well,” says de Jong. “So you can literally get a cold oven ready to fire at 800 degrees in 45 to 50 minutes, which is very fast. We have found the perfect balance with the material,” de Jong remarks. “Some of the residential ovens are wrapped in stucco, some in tile, but you can also order unfinished ovens that can be customized with whatever material you choose.”

The Pompeii-style ovens have a chimney at the front, located atop the opening of the dome-shaped oven, which is great for cooking not just pizza but fish, poultry, beef, veggies and more. “We have the foundation series, which is basically a kit and then a masonry-finished oven,” says de Jong. “And then we have our Volcano series, which is named after three Italian volcanoes that are still currently live. Then we have an oven that we bring in from Naples, which is built by the oldest oven builder in the world.”

“A live fire is exciting, it’s cool,” he says. “People don’t want to hang around a metal box.” Fiero Casa confirms that beauty is power.