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# FRESH SPIRIT

BY ADAM GRYBOWSKI

## ON A ROLL

*A converted 1949 REO Speed Wagon is bringing a fresh new spin to the words “pizza delivery.”*

It's the morning of a big event and Stalin Bedon and Tom Grim, the owners of Nomad Pizza, wake up early. Meeting at Grim's Hopewell home, the two immediately get to work inside the classic truck that sits at the bottom of Grim's steep gravel driveway. Three to four hours later, the truck's wood-fired brick oven, weighing



over a ton and reaching temperatures upward of 1,000 degrees, is heated up and ready to cook a pizza in under two minutes.

Redefining “pizza delivery,” Nomad Pizza Company has fully equipped the 1949 REO Speed Wagon truck to be a traveling pizzeria. The comparison to conventional pizza makers is stark: Jackson Pollock versus paint by number. Their pizza is rustic and sparse and their truck is unlike anything that has ever cruised the well-traveled roads of New Jersey.

The vehicle is a self-contained catering kitchen on wheels, complete with two stainless-steel sinks, a commercial refrigerator, a breaker box, a generator that connects to the gas line and a propane tank for heating water from the truck's 35-gallon tank. The centerpiece, of course, is the imported Italian brick oven.

Created in 2007, Nomad Pizza caters events across central Jersey. Arriving at its destination, the truck serves pizza buffet style, along with salad, coffee and, for dessert, ice cream or Nutella and banana on pizza crust. Slats removed from the side of the truck serve as tables. An onboard sound system with an iPod hookup provides music. A mechanical awning extends over the work area so pizza makers can work in light rain, though the business goes on hiatus over the winter.

Before the idea of a traveling wood-fired oven ever crossed Grim's mind, he wanted to open a regular pizzeria. “I've always had an interest in baking bread,” he says. “I used to make it in college. When I started to make it again, I used a recipe from a book called *The Bread*

*Baker's Apprentice*. At the bottom of the page it mentioned you could use the dough to make pizza, so I thought, Wow, maybe I'll try it some time. And then I kept trying to improve it. I found a company in California that sold wood-fired ovens imported from Italy and I bought one. At that

point, I had nothing specific in mind. I ordered the oven because if I did open a restaurant, I wanted to know what I was doing.”

When the oven arrived with a crack in it, the California company shipped a new replacement, which Grim installed in his kitchen. As he was preparing to toss the damaged oven, his friend Bedon suggested putting it on the back of a truck and going into business. Bedon thought his idea was original. “I've had so many original ideas,” he says, “and then I Google them and the idea's gone. Someone's already done it.”

In this case, the “someone” was Douglas Coffin, owner and operator of the Big Green Truck, a Connecticut company that makes pizza in a wood-fired oven that travels on the back of a 1946 International Harvester. Grim went to Connecticut to meet him.

“I thought it was the coolest idea,” Grim says. “He gave me a ton of information and really helped us out. Then we started thinking a little more seriously about it.”

Bedon and Grim have been playing pool together every Tuesday night for over 15 years. (Hawaiian shirts, standard dress on pool nights, have become the Nomad Pizza uniform.) One night, to Grim's surprise, Bedon announced that he had placed a bid on eBay for a restored REO Speed Wagon. Neither man had yet decided if they were truly serious about starting the business.

For Bedon, who is from Ecuador, Nomad Pizza is the latest venture of an eclectic career that includes working in a toy store and as a landscaper (and eventually creating his own company, Buena Vista



Landscaping, with another partner). From 1987 to 1997, he worked at Thomas Sweet in Princeton, reporting to Grim, the cofounder of the ice cream shop with locations in Princeton, New Brunswick and Washington, D.C. When Bedon found himself without a place to live when his aunt relocated to California, Grim invited him to move in. The two weren't particularly close—it's just that Grim's a generous guy, Bedon says.

"Stalin lived with us for many years," Grim says. "I was living in this big house and we had an extra bedroom. Why not let someone use it? It just seemed like the right thing to do."

Bedon won the eBay auction for \$5,200, and the Speed Wagon was shipped to him from its home in Canada on a flatbed. "It's a beautiful truck, a work of art," Grim says. The fenders are the color of root beer and the body vanilla, with matching hubcaps. Its few mechanical problems, such as a lack of brakes, were easily repaired.

Today the truck maxes out at 45 miles per hour. Bedon jokes that once he reaches the top of a hill, and if the wind happens to blow just right, the truck can really pick up speed. Its longest trip to date has been a 60-mile trek to the shore, traveling in the slow lane on Interstate 195 while traffic blew by. The Speed Wagon seems to amuse most people, and they often smile or wave in appreciation.

The truck may first attract your attention, but it's the pizza that wins your heart. Grim had his first experience with wood-fired pizza while vacationing in Italy about five years ago. "I was just blown away, it was so good," he says. "Everyone in Italy has a garden. Everybody. They just drive up and drop off fresh boxes of vegetables to these pizzerias. You don't see that in this country. We're trying to emulate that, instead of using everything out of a can."

The partners hope, in time, to get all their ingredients from New Jersey. They use tomatoes from Lambertville's North Slope Farm and have been experimenting with freezing their own tomatoes, as well as making their own flour. Grim's garden supplies herbs.

"We've gotten too far from the source of our food," Grim says. "But you can only do as much as you can do. What do you do for tomatoes once the season's done? Maybe can them. We had too much to do this year, but maybe we'll try it next year. ... Our goal is to use local ingredients as much as we can."

Nomad uses a rustic-style dough that's wet enough to withstand the high temperatures of the oven. It's sticky and difficult to work with, as well as slow rising, which gives it time to develop a good quality texture and complex flavor. "Dough is one of those things that's not better fresh," Grim says. "The older the dough the better the crust."

He has begun making dough up to a week ahead of an event.

"The oven is the most important part, other than crust, and they work together," Grim says. "That very fast searing heat is very important for cooking the crust, to make it crisp on the outside and moist on the inside."

As with all artisan foods, the personality and skill of the producer, along with circumstances and availability of ingredients, affect the product. Depending upon what wood is available on a certain day, for example, the oven may be fired with apple wood instead of oak, which impacts the pizza's flavor. Because the oven's temperature cannot be precisely controlled, each pie potentially cooks differently. If the floor of the oven is too hot, the bottom cooks quickly and the pizza maker has to lift the pie near the ceiling to finish cooking the top.

"Controlling the heat is an art," Grim says. "That comes with experience. But that's part of the beauty—the pizza's not always the same. I think it's a strength, not a weakness. Our pizza will never be as perfect as Domino's. We're not putting it through a conveyor belt."

Customers who see the truck and taste the pizza for the first time often ask Grim and Bedon about their main location. Right now, Nomad's main location happens to be wherever they are. But, with plans underway to open a restaurant in Hopewell this summer, wheels are in motion ... □



Photo: Tony Oppenheim