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Diners enjoy casual weekend meals at American Flatbread. (Photo by David Lyon / For The Boston Globe)

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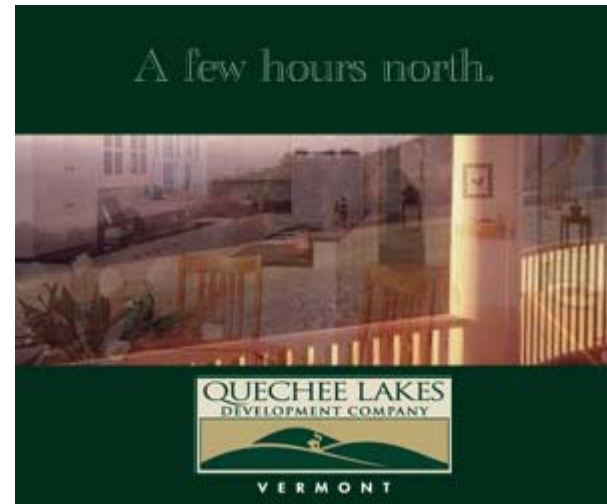
The Boston Globe

On weekends, the pizza stays on the premises

By Patricia Harris and David Lyon, Globe Correspondents
| April 9, 2006

MIDDLEBURY, Vt. -- It's a form of cruel and unusual punishment to wander around Middlebury on weekdays, when the aromas from the American Flatbread factory in the historic Marble Works complex come wafting across the river and settle in by the falls at Frog Hollow.

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The pizzas redolent of marinara, caramelized onions, and roasted peppers are whisked from the clay oven into cryogenic preservation. They are strictly wholesale. The facility turns out 1,300 pizzas a day, available in the Greater Boston area in the frozen-food sections of Whole Foods and Wild Harvest markets, among others.

But come 5 p.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, the factory floor is transformed into a casual restaurant. The high-ceilinged space is packed with tables and folding chairs that radiate out from the huge clay oven at one end of the room. The intense flame from mixed hardwoods casts a warm glow on the red and white checked tablecloths. As a nice touch, each table holds a small vase of flowers and a single white taper. Slow Food slogans and cheery paintings of food suffice for decor.

Those familiar with American Flatbread's frozen products will be surprised by the range of choices. "We can offer combinations that don't freeze well or that use meat, which we don't put on frozen pizzas," Marin Melchior, the cook, explained when she brought our selection to the table. Unable to choose a single combination, we ordered a half-and-half. One side was topped with maple-fennel sausage (made on the premises with naturally raised pork from a farm in Weybridge, sundried tomatoes, onions, mushrooms, and cheese. The other side had a thin skin of local mozzarella over baby spinach, crimini mushrooms, and a rich bolognese sauce.

Like the Quebecois-style beehive oven, the sauce-making operation is decidedly low tech. The sauces are prepared in a 60-gallon cauldron that swings on a cast-iron arm above the wood fire in a large fireplace. All the complicated machinery (like the flash freezing unit) is hidden away.

While some toppings repeat from week to week, including the ever-popular Punctuated Equilibrium (Kalamata olives, roasted peppers, Vermont chevre, fresh rosemary, red onions, and garlic), Melchior likes to dream up new combinations. On a Friday night in March, there were two vegetarian options: roasted beets and Great Hill Blue cheese with organic citrus vinaigrette, and summer squash, avocado, cherry tomatoes, and local basil and mozzarella.

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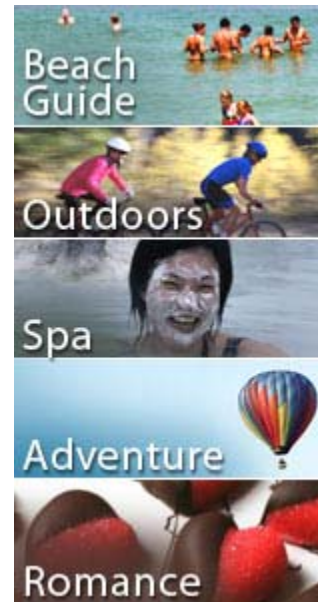
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As many of the ingredients as possible are organically grown (including the wheat for the flour). During the summer, Melchior likes to capitalize on fresh produce from the farmer's market that sets up twice a week outside the Marble Works complex. "If there's something really good or in great supply, like heirloom tomatoes or incredible eggplant, I'll build a topping combination around it," she said.

Maybe it's because they've been smelling the pizzas all week, but it seems like everyone in town shows up for the Friday and Saturday night dinners -- college students, couples, and families with young children.

The organic emphasis does not demonize sugar. In addition to fresh-baked pies and brownies for dessert, American Flatbread also serves Ben & Jerry's ice cream.

Contact Patricia Harris and David Lyon, freelance writers in Cambridge, at harris.lyon@verizon.net. ■

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