

IN THE KITCHEN

BY SARAH O'KELLY

WITH RICKY HACKER AND MATT MCINTOSH

A cloak of comforting warmth envelops the senses as one steps into EVO pizzeria. Soft lighting plays off the blond wood floors and ceiling, creating an ambience that invites lingering. The wood-burning pizza oven glows merrily in the corner, and the tall bar offers a perfect vantage point from which to watch Ricky Hacker and Matt McIntosh shaping dough and tending the fire.

It's a far cry from their last location. For the past two years Hacker and McIntosh sold pizza solely from a cart. Until the March opening of their North Charleston restaurant, most of their business came from the Charleston Farmers Market at Marion Square, where they baked pizzas in their mobile wood-burning oven. (EVO stands for "Extra-Virgin Oven.") The market proved an ideal location for the evolution of their business—these seasonally conscious cooks strive to use as many local ingredients as possible. They buy shrimp and potatoes from Celeste Albers and herbs from Pete Madsen.

Such a passion for fresh food does not stem from childhood years in the garden but from the exact opposite. Both Hacker and McIntosh say that they grew up eating junk food, and that their families did not cook much. But rather than fall into these patterns, they became determined to seek out knowledge of good food. Hacker left his home state of Delaware to attend the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, and McIntosh moved from Indiana to Charleston, where he enrolled in the culinary arts program at Johnson and Wales. Their paths crossed in 2003 when they both found themselves cooking at FIG restaurant. Eventually, talk turned to their mutual dream of opening a pizzeria. By June 2004 they began meeting once a month to discuss their future business. Unfortunately, while they possessed the knowledge and energy, they lacked capital.

Both had just bought houses and had no equity to secure physical property. Yet they were determined to work for themselves. After spending months searching for an affordable location, the idea struck them, "What if we put an oven on a trailer?" A little research proved that this was not such a crazy proposition, as they found two brothers-in-law in Pittsburgh who manufacture pizza carts.



Hacker and McIntosh conducted a bit of market research here in Charleston and decided that they had a feasible business plan. In the winter of 2005 they found themselves heading up to Pittsburgh and baking pizzas in the snow. In May Hacker and McIntosh christened their own cart. They played around with the oven, cooked a few pizzas for themselves and headed off to a flea market in Myrtle Beach. They only made three sales, and now

they laugh looking back on that rough first day. The next day they set up at the Charleston Farmers Market and experienced a different sort of initiation. "We got crushed," says Hacker. They sold over 50 pizzas and experienced some important revelations, such as "We need more wood."

Gradually, Hacker and McIntosh worked out the kinks of their operation and identified their individual roles. "I'm the shaper, and he's the baker," says Hacker. When the new Cooper River Bridge opened in the summer of 2005, EVO sold more than 130 pizzas.

By 2006 Hacker and McIntosh had secured nearly full-time work for their mobile business. They worked four to six days each week either at markets or catering, and EVO became a fixture on Saturdays at Marion Square. There, sales became consistent, averaging out at 90 pizzas per market, and regulars developed, such as



Photographs by: Robert Manning

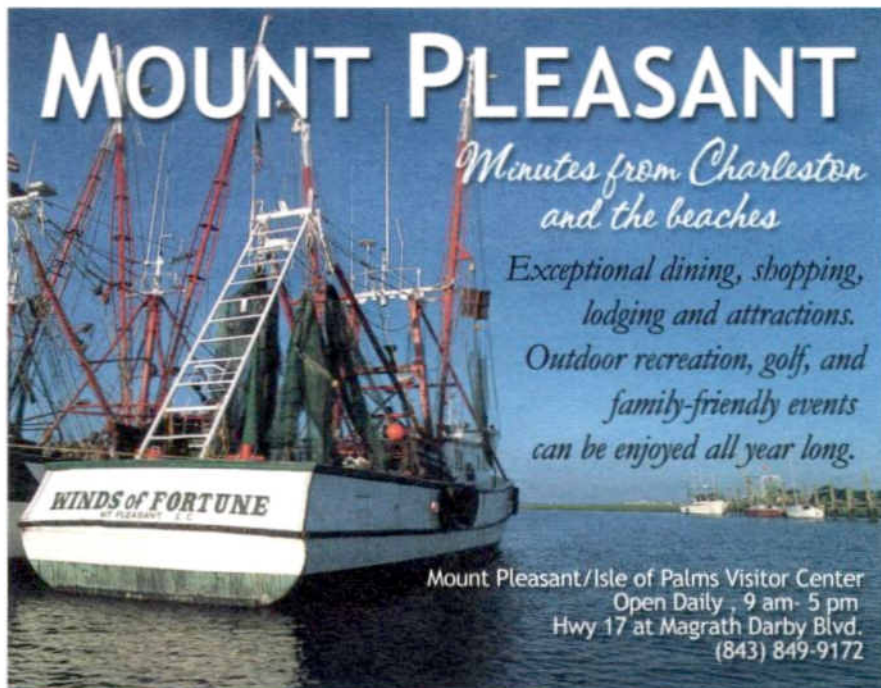
a downtown resident who arrives promptly at 7:45 every Saturday morning for her pizza fix. Hacker and McIntosh enlisted the help of their significant others—Hacker's fiancée, Elena, and McIntosh's wife, Mahwish—and their good friend Brendan Sweeney became their roadie.

The popularity of EVO seems natural when you consider their unique pizza format. First, they bake pies that bring to mind real Italian pizza. The crust is thin and a bit charred from the wood-burning oven, and the toppings are light—just enough to cover without weighing down. Second, local ingredients serve as their muse. Both Hacker and McIntosh believe firmly in the importance of a connection to the land.

McIntosh and his wife are the convivium leaders of the local Slow Food chapter, which they founded in 2004 with Chef Mike Lata of FIG and Celeste Albers. The goal of this international group is to preserve the traditions of the farm and the table, and EVO does just that through their creative use of area products. One of their top sellers on Saturdays proved to be a pizza they coined "the Local," which features new potatoes, spring onions and basil that all come from the market. Another favorite plays on the perennial Charleston dish of shrimp and grits by combining shrimp, bacon, roasted garlic and skillet corn on a pizza.

While the Saturday market provided a great customer base for EVO, neither Hacker nor McIntosh ever lost sight of their goal to open a pizzeria. Finally, in late 2006 they found a location in the newly renovated downtown area of North Charleston. McIntosh and his wife live in the nearby neighborhood of Park Circle and feel that the revitalization of this area is just beginning. Hacker and McIntosh introduced themselves to the local clientele over the past year by setting up their cart each Wednesday on a street corner that just happened to be directly across from their present stationary location.

Looking out from the restaurant you can see their old spot and imagine how far they have come. In two months they have renovated a modest law office into a sleek restaurant, doing most of the work themselves. Now, they have a bona fide Italian pizza oven, and they can serve lunch and dinner. They can offer soups, salads and panini, and in the future they hope to incorporate a charcuterie program. But they will not relinquish the cart as they plan to still work the Saturday market and cater parties. And they will most certainly not forget the farmers. Recently, they discovered a couple in Monks Corner who grow lettuce, tomatoes and



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A Pleasant Alternative

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cucumbers year-round through the magic of hydroponics. EVO offers a salad featuring these ingredients, and of course their local focus will only increase as the bountiful warm weather months arrive. Hacker looks forward with contagious optimism. "It can only get better for our generation," he says. "We will be looking at a whole different way of eating." 🍷

To visit EVO's new restaurant:
1075 E. Montague Ave.
Park Circle, N. Charleston
(843) 225-1796; www.evopizza.com