HERE’S THE CONCEIT: Build a single wood fire and, over the course of 30-plus hours, use it to roast, braise, bake, simmer and grill as many different dishes as possible — for lunch, dinner, breakfast and lunch again. The main ingredients: one whole goat from the McCormack Ranch in Rio Vista, Calif.; several crates of seasonal produce (and a case of olive oil) from Hudson Ranch in Napa; a basket of morels and porcini gathered near Mount Shasta; an assortment of spices from Boulettes Larder in San Francisco; and a couple of cases of wine from Kermit Lynch in Berkeley. The setting: a shady backyard in Napa (but picture suburban subdivision, not vineyard estate), where a big country table stretches out beneath the canopy of a mulberry tree. The cast: three accomplished Bay Area chefs (Mike and Jenny Emanuel — whose kitchen and backyard we’ve commandeered for the weekend — and Melissa Fernandez), one gifted baker (Chad Robertson), one jack of all culinary trades (Anthony Tassinello) and two amateurs (me and my 17-year-old son, Isaac). The guests: all of the above, plus a rotating crew of spouses, children, friends and neighbors. The fire: almond, oak and mulberry logs burning in a cob oven that Mike Emanuel built with the help of some friends in 2006. A cob, or earth, oven is a primitive, domed cooking device that can be made from layers of mud, clay, straw, stucco, even manure; the earthy mixture, the cob, can endure much higher heat, and hold it much longer, than an indoor oven can. Emanuel’s incarnation, which he built “to bring together family and friends for extended feasts,” stands 5 feet tall with a 30-inch hearth and looks like a cartoon character: a visitor from a planet of chubby, eyeless, big-mouthed monsters.

The inspiration for this pyro-gastronomical experiment was the communal ovens still found burning in some towns around the Mediterranean, centers of social gravity where, each morning, people bring their proofed, or risen, loaves to be baked. (Each loaf bears a signature slash so you can be sure the one you get back is your own.) But after the bread is out of the oven, people show up with a variety of other dishes to wring every last B.T.U. from the day’s fire: pizzas while the oven is still blazing and then, as the day goes on, gentle braises or even pots of yogurt to capture the last heat and flavors of the dying embers.
The idea is to make the most efficient use of precious firewood and to keep the heat (and the danger) of the cook fire some distance from everybody's homes. But what appeals to me about the tradition is how the communal oven also becomes a focus for social life ("focus" is Latin for "hearth"), a place to gather and gossip and escape the solitude of cooking at home. Shared meals have always been about community, about what happens among family and friends — even enemies — when they gather around a table to eat; but once upon a time, before every family had its own kitchen in which Mom labored more or less alone, cooking was itself a social activity, one that fostered community and conversation around the chopping board or cook fire long before the meal was served.

Our own backyard experiment with a communal oven, which unfolded last June over the first weekend of summer, was in spirit obviously more playful than practical. But when Mike offered to organize and host what amounted to a 36-hour dinner party, I was immediately intrigued: could an around-the-clock cook fire still exert the same social force? I barely knew most of the people with whom I'd be spending the weekend, and I wondered how well two days of working side by side and eating at the same table would wear on everyone. I also wondered about the food — whether four meals teased from a single fire, three of them from one goat, would get a little monotonous. But then, my previous experience of cooking with fire was pretty much limited to grilling slabs of meat on a Weber. I had no idea just how many different things one fire could do.

SATURDAY

9:22 a.m. Mike has laid the fire in the mouth of the oven: a tidy pyramid of crumpled newspaper, kindling and split logs. He waited for Isaac and me to show up before lighting it. Isaac lets Mike's 12-year-old son, Will, do the honors. The oven's draft must be good, because the fire leaps to life almost instantly. The shape of the oven and the size of its single opening are designed to draw in air along the floor, then conduct it around the curving back and roof of the dome before exhausting it at the top of the opening. Within minutes, fat tongues of flame are licking at the top of its mouth, reaching out. This fire will burn straight through the weekend, though not always in this oven: to bake bread, we'll need to remove the burning logs and embers to a fire pit nearby — a concrete ring of partly buried sewer pipe — and then transfer them back. The most important cooking implement of the weekend will turn out to be a shovel.

10 a.m. While we wait for the oven to become hot enough to fire pizzas, Mike and Melissa break down the goat on the table outside. The rest of us mostly watch, lending a steadying hand from time to time. Ten days ago, Mike and I drove to the ranch to choose our animal and watch an itinerant butcher slaughter and dress it; Mike says the experience made him want to honor our goat by wasting as little of it as possible. Melissa is small but strong and has a sure hand with the hacksaw and the butcher knife; within
20 minutes the goat is transformed into considerably more appetizing cuts of meat: the baron, or hindquarters, and the saddle (both to be roasted for tonight’s dinner); two racks of ribs (for tomorrow’s lunch); the shoulders (destined for an overnight braise); and the scraps, which Anthony collects to make a sugo — a slow-cooked Italian meat sauce — for tonight’s first course and to make sausage for the pizzas. Mike cuts a few slivers from the loin and passes them around; a ceremonial tasting of the uncooked animal is, he explains, “a butcher’s privilege.” The raw meat is surprisingly sweet and tender. It’s so good, in fact, that we decide to make some crudo, or goat tartare, for an appetizer.

11 a.m. We break into small groups to prep for lunch, some of us working inside in the kitchen, others outside at the big table. Everybody is chopping and chatting — those of us who know one another, catching up; those of us who don’t, getting acquainted. My lunchtime job is to assemble, with Isaac’s help, a shaved vegetable salad — a julienne of everything that the farmer at Hudson Ranch, Scott Boggs, picked for us: fennel, carrots, radishes, cabbage, summer squash and green beans, all tossed with lemon juice, olive oil, pounded garlic, fresh herbs and salt. Over the top, I shave a few papery slices of fresh porcini and Parmesan. In the kitchen, Melissa is simmering a stock made from the goat’s head, organs and bones while Anthony is grinding meat for sausage, sprinkling it with fennel pollen. Out by the fire, Chad, the baker, is starting to stretch his pizza dough, which he mixed last night.

1 p.m. Using a thermometer gun, which measures the temperature wherever you aim its infrared beam, Chad has determined that the floor of the oven is between 700 and 900 degrees, hot enough to cook a pizza in four or five minutes. He invites people over to make their pizzas from a variety of toppings that Melissa, Anthony and Mike prepared: sautéed squid, several kinds of cheese, goat sausage, morels, porcini, chopped herbs and green and yellow coins of summer squash. Chad shows us how to stretch a ball of dough over our fists and rotate it until it is paper thin. After we decorate our pies, Melissa, who ran the pizza oven at Chez Panisse for six years, shows us how to use the long-handled paddle to quarter-turn the pie in the oven as soon as the section of crust nearest the burning logs begins to balloon and blister. I think of professional chefs as control freaks, but Melissa and Chad are happy to let go and let everyone try their hand. So what if some of the pizzas aren’t perfect circles? Isaac makes a goat-sausage-and-mushroom pizza that he declares the best he’s ever tasted. I have to agree: Chad’s crust is crisp but with a chewy interior, and all the toppings are nicely inflected by wood smoke.

3 p.m. After a leisurely lunch well oiled by a few bottles of rosé, everyone is ready for a snooze, but Mike reminds us that there’s dinner to prep and bread to bake and a fire that needs our attention. Chad has proofed several loaves of his big country bread. (This may
be the most coveted loaf in the Bay Area, selling out every evening at Tartine, his bakery in the Mission.) Mike helps him shovel all the burning logs and embers out of the oven and into the fire pit to even out the heat in the oven and eliminate the smoke. Even without a fire in it, the oven holds heat remarkably well: the gun clocks the back of the oven at 550 degrees, perfect for bread. But the floor must be hotter, because the bottom of the first loaf blackens before it has fully risen and crusted. Chad slides in a “sacrificial loaf” — one he bakes solely to cool the oven floor. By the time he slides in the next one, conditions are good though still not ideal. Chad says the dome of the oven is too high to give the tops of the loaves the hard, dark crust he’s aiming for. Everyone else thinks the bread came out wonderfully moist and chewy, but Chad is not thrilled, and his relationship with the oven will remain testy all weekend.

6 p.m. Once all the loaves are out, we shovel the fire back into the oven and add logs to build up heat for the roast. I hold back some of the burning embers in the fire pit, where I plan to roast the root vegetables in a bed of ashes. Called rescoldo, this is a method described by the Argentine chef Francis Mallmann in his book “Seven Fires”: bury whole beets, turnips, carrots and any other root vegetables in the ashes of a dying fire; dig them out a couple of hours later, dust off the ashes (or peel the vegetables, if you don’t like eating a little ash) and serve. Immediately I face my first fire-management challenge: the dying fire is a little too dead, so I have to add kindling and resuscitate it by blowing through a four-foot-long steel straw that Mike has for just this purpose. Soon, however, the fire is blazing and threatens to burn my vegetables beyond a crisp, so I now have to stifle it by shoveling in more ash. My first lesson about cooking with live fire: at any given moment, there is either too much of it or not quite enough; the sweet spot is hard to find and fleeting.

6:50 p.m. While I was worrying my fire and root vegetables, Mike and Melissa, who have emerged as something of a leadership team, were prepping the roasts, giving the baron and the saddle a deep-tissue massage with a mixture of pounded herbs and garlic and then wrapping them in a beautiful white lace of caul fat, the sort of item professional chefs just seem to have around. I’m beginning to appreciate Mike’s genius for what chefs call the mise en place: making certain everything we could possibly need is at hand; never once have we had to run out to the store for a missing ingredient. Another lesson. I’m also impressed by the ease with which these cooks collaborate, how they can go back and forth from taking the lead on a dish to playing sous chef. These meals are a group endeavor, and everyone seems happy to share authorship. Except, that is, for the two bakers — Anthony and Chad — who occupy their own private bubbles of activity. Not sure why, but perhaps because baking demands more precision and therefore tighter control.
The oven is hovering between 450 and 500 degrees when Mike slides in the roasting pan. In the kitchen, meanwhile, Melissa is stirring a big pot of extremely slow-cooked polenta and tending to the goat sugo, while Anthony is whipping eggs for his dessert. He’s assembling individual pots with slabs of spongecake soaked in sparkling wine and topped by wedges of fresh apricots and a sabayon: an airy custard of whipped eggs and cream tinted with saffron threads. The dessert needs to be ready to go into the oven when the roast comes out; oven traffic is building.

7:30 p.m. While we wait for the roasts to finish, Anthony brings out a platter of one of the few dishes untouched by our fire, his crudo: a rough dice of raw goat tenderloin with lemon juice, olive oil and a drizzle of raw egg yolk, served on a bed of rocket (a.k.a. arugula) and shaved raw porcini. Federal food-safety authorities would not approve of Anthony’s dish, but spooned onto toasts made over the fire pit, the crudo is luscious: lemony, silky and cool.

7:45 p.m. The captivating scents emanating from the oven are drawing people outside and into its orbit. A few neighbors magically appear through an opening in the back fence, wondering what’s cooking. Unidentified children and puppies are suddenly underfoot. The gravitational field of the cook fire seems to have enlarged our little community, so Jenny sets a few more places at the big table.

8 p.m. When Mike and Melissa pull the roasts from the oven, putting them on the lip to rest, I set about retrieving the fire-roasted root vegetables, which requires a treasure hunt. The beets and turnips I can find, excavating among the ashes with a long pair of tongs, but the carrots have vaporized: the fire seems to have eaten them. I dust off as much ash as possible and put the vegetables, which are nicely charred and smell fantastic, on a platter. Isaac voices skepticism.

8:30 p.m. We sit down to dinner at last, starting with Melissa’s sugo over polenta. The dish is unbelievably rich, owing no doubt to the goat-head stock, the organ meats in the sugo and the long, slow cooking of the polenta. (Melissa also soaked it overnight, “blooming” and slightly fermenting the corn meal.) Mike carves the roasts; the meat, which is mild and sweet, has a perfect ratio of deeply browned, smoky crust to pink interior. To accompany it, Anthony has chopped a salsa verde, made extra-astringent by the addition of fresh grape leaves. Opinion is divided on my roasted root vegetables, with Isaac firmly in the rejectionist camp. The beets and turnips are nicely caramelized and aromatic, but the ash coating takes some mental adjustment that not everyone can manage.

It is a long, loquacious and delicious dinner, made more special by the fact that virtually everyone at the table had a hand in preparing it. I feel as if I’ve already learned a lot
cooking with this crew, especially about working together and trading ideas. Each dish might have a lead cook, but other cooks will contribute a technique or flavoring — dozens of tasting spoons have been passed around — so that the final product becomes something more or less new, even to its author. Already I’m better acquainted with everyone in the easy way that seems to happen when people work together, especially at tasks, like kitchen prep, that leave plenty of mental space for talking. The flow of conversation has been desultory, drifting from summer plans to the World Cup (playing earlier in the living room), kids, other meals, the work at hand. But it is the working together at less-than-all-consuming tasks that seems to be forging our motley crew (far flung in age and background) into something that feels like a community. Sometimes getting to know people is easier done side by side than it is face to face.

9:45 p.m. Anthony has left us to tend to his apricots, which emerge from the oven fragrant and caramelized with perfect black tips. Their sabayon blanket is blazingly bright yellow-orange from the saffron — apricot on apricot — and the flavor is as intensely layered as the color: honeyed ripe fruit, sweet spices, wine and wood smoke.

10:30 p.m. Mike, easily the most compulsive and conscientious member of our group, pops up from the table to go work on the braise for tomorrow’s lunch, something no one else is quite ready to confront. But the fire, fading now, is just right: 400 degrees and subsiding slowly. For tomorrow’s meals, the culinary inspiration has shifted from Italy to other shores of the Mediterranean: Morocco and the Middle East. The goat shoulder has been marinating all day in harissa. In a big, old crock, Mike and Melissa bed down the shoulder on a mirepoix and add a couple of cinnamon sticks, slices of preserved lemon and handfuls of Persian mint and fresh green coriander seeds. Over that, they pour what’s left of the goat stock and some white wine. To seal the crock as tightly as possible, I retrieve some of Chad’s surplus dough from the compost, roll it into a thick rope and use it to caulk the top of the pot before Mike slides it into the oven and closes the door.

11 p.m. Indefatigable Mike has yet one more dish he wants to tease from our fire, using its fading heat to ferment some goat’s-milk yogurt. He inoculates a crock of milk with a spoonful of yogurt and then sets it in a water bath on top of the oven to gently heat overnight. Now we’re done for the day. Everyone except Anthony is too tired to take up Mike on his offer to watch “The Baker’s Wife,” the Pagnol film, projected on the back wall of his house. The rest of us head off to bed.

SUNDAY

6 a.m. [This entry is based on reports; I’m still asleep.] Mike jumps out of bed in his underwear to check on the braise. The fire is all but completely out, but the braise is done and looks perfect, the top of the shoulder crusted in deep brown bark and the liquid
thickened to a rich paste. The goat’s milk, however, has curdled: too much heat. Undeterred, Mike adds a pinch of salt to the curds and puts them in a cheesecloth to drain, hoping to salvage a farmer's cheese for our breakfast.

**8:30 a.m.** The core group reassembles in the backyard for breakfast. Mike has coaxed the fire in the oven back to life. I’m starting to think of the fire as a creature with its own moods and appetites; now it needs to be fed. Chad has kindled a second fire in the pit and is toasting slices of yesterday’s bread. Melissa, meanwhile, has prepped an unexpectedly intricate yet goat-free breakfast: in individual clay pots, she arranged sautéed porcini on a bed of blanched amaranth greens picked from Mike’s garden. Over that, she cracked an egg and drizzled some cream. The pots go into the oven for several minutes, and when they come out she gives each a dollop of green-tomato chutney and dusts them with dukkah, an Egyptian spice-and-nut blend. All I can say about dukkah is that it does extraordinary things to an egg, as does wreathing cream briefly in wood smoke. But breakfast cannot be entirely goat-free: Mike’s accidental farmer’s cheese turned out to be delicate and sweet. One of the best bites of the weekend, if not of all time, is of a slice of Chad’s toast spread with Mike’s cheese and Jenny’s apricot jam and then liberally sprinkled with dukkah. It takes a village to make some toast, apparently, but this is one sublime piece of toast.

**9:38 a.m.** We’re still at the breakfast table when Mike starts pouring glasses of Vouvray to mark the 24 hours that have passed since we lighted the fire. By now, having shared so much eating and drinking and cooking, everyone feels comfortable enough not to have to talk; we’ve all entered the same psychological space. Even so, the Vouvray strikes me as ill advised, because we still have one more big meal to prep, this one for the largest group yet — the 25 or so friends, spouses, neighbors and local farmers expected for lunch. But no one else seems concerned; the mood is mellow in the extreme.

**10:30 a.m.** The pace starts to pick up. Melissa goes to work on the braise, removing the bones and skimming the fat. I take charge of the goat kabobs. Working with meat that Mike has ground with Moroccan spices, I form it around skewers like naked sausages: kefta, they’re called. Chad is off by himself by the oven rolling dough for some flatbread pitas; bakers are solitaries, I decide. Prematurely, perhaps, because at the big table Isaac is helping Anthony pit Bing cherries and, using an old-timey wooden ice cream maker, hand-cranking frozen goat’s-milk yogurt for dessert. (Mike finally nailed the yogurt, but on a hot plate inside.) The cranking is arduous, so Anthony recruits everyone, guests included, to take a turn as the price of dessert. The pitted cherries, with the addition of cinnamon, orange zest and eau de vie, go into a crock that will go into the fire to roast briefly.
11:30 a.m. Mike and I have rigged a pseudo-tandoori oven for the kabobs: a big clay garden pot half filled with hot coals stolen from the oven and topped with the pot’s saucer. But it works only so-so: to fit under the lid, the skewers need to be planted in the hot coals at a fairly steep angle, and even after I improvise a tinfoil cap for each of them, sort of like the hand guard on a sword, the meat still wants to slide down into the ashes. So I move the skewers onto the grill over the fire pit, sharing space with Melissa, who is grilling the goat racks, obsessively turning them this way and that over the open fire.

12:30 p.m. Fire traffic is building again: Chad needs to get into the oven to bake his flatbreads (on a very hot fire), Melissa needs to reheat the braise, Anthony wants to roast his cherries at a lower temp and Mike’s got a rice pilaf he needs to crisp. They work it out: build a big fire to bake the flatbreads and then bring down the heat by shoveling the burning logs into the fire pit.

1:30 p.m. Lunch turns out to be a sprawling, semi-spontaneous party. Word (and aroma) of our doings has gotten around, and a few more neighbors show up. It’s a good thing, too, because we have a ton of food — all of today’s creations plus a considerable amount of distinguished leftovers. Mike has also invited several of the folks who produced the ingredients we’ve been cooking. A dozen beautiful platters of food crowd the big table, the handiwork of so many gifted hands working together. I count at least seven dishes made from that one goat and this 30-hour-old fire, so many complex variations on such a simple theme.

Lunchtime spreads out liquidly over the rest of the day, the adults lingering at the table, Isaac and Will strumming their guitars, the little kids playing with the dogs. The food is delicious, the chops perfectly grilled, the pitas soft and puffy and perfect for stuffing with meat and Mike’s goat’s-milk yogurt sauce — and the now-obligatory dukkah. But by now the food feels almost beside the point. I realize I’ve gotten at least as much pleasure from working together to create these meals as I have from eating them. Sometimes producing things is more gratifying — and more conducive to building community — than consuming them, I decide. Our guests seem merry and convivial, but there’s something special about the camaraderie of the kitchen crew.

After Anthony pulls his crock of roasted cherries from the oven, we let the fire die, just short of 36 hours after lighting it. This fire has been protean, and the big-mouthed oven, which by now seems more like a character in our drama than a prop, has been prodigious in its output. I raise a glass to offer a toast, first to our hosts, then, of course, to the goat and lastly to all the cooks at the table. It seems to me that one of the many, many things our fire produced is a sense of community, as cook fires have probably always done, but especially among those of us who worked to bring all this food to the table. So I add to
my toast an impromptu announcement, unauthorized but, I’m hoping, true: that Mike and Jenny have graciously agreed to host the second annual live-fire weekend next summer, thereby turning our improbable experiment into a tradition
Tonight’s dinner party scene, which features a passionate row about politics, took 36 hours to film. Doyle said: “It’s very different filming at Ealing [where downstairs scenes are shot] and Highclere. It offers different challenges. You’re in someone’s home for a start and lots of people are making sure that you’re very careful. In that dining room, there’s a £17million Van Dyck on the wall, so you don’t mess about with it!” Kevin Doyle. There are also very valuable paintings around so there are other concerns apart from the work. The 36-Hour Dinner Party. By Michael Pollan The New York Times Magazine, October 10, 2010.

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