

Alfresco Wood Fired Midi Oven DIY 101

I have had a couple of Alfresco Wood Fired Ovens and loved them! The first was an Original and was built by the good people at Sydney Heaters and Pizza Ovens. Peter came down from Sydney and built the whole thing in to my courtyard area and did a magnificent job. Sadly, when I sold that house the pizza oven stayed there.

The second oven I had was a Midi on a frame with wheels. Jonelle and Trent sent the oven over for the Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show. I had it placed in one of the gardens in the competition and did cooking demos in it for Jenny Craig. Twenty-five to thirty thousand people came through the show so it was a great success. After the show I took the oven back to my house – which was great and awkward as I didn't know where to put it nor how I would put it there! I could have left it out the front but that is not really practical. So, to get it out the back I could crane it over the house – the quote for that was \$4500.00 or I could cut a hole in the back of my garage, pull some pavers up and possibly cut some trees down and if lucky squeeze it down the side and into the perfect spot on my patio. Luckily option three worked with the exception that when I sold that house the thought of trying to get it out sent shivers down my spine and the decision was made to leave it.

Enter my third Alfresco Woodfired Oven and this time a DIY. Funnily enough where I live now I could easily have ordered the preassembled Midi and just wheeled it through my garage and into place but I thought it was time I actually had the experience of building one myself. Jonelle and Trent say it takes about six hours to put together so I thought I would put it to the test.

PICKING IT UP

My daughter Elise and her husband Jack also bought a DIY courtyard oven at the same time I got mine so both were delivered to the Melbourne freight place on the same day. To get her oven delivered from there to her house the quote was \$63.90, to get my oven delivered to my house was \$433.72!! Luckily, I have a friend with a truck. Pig is his name, his company is “The Dig Pig” and he does all sorts of building and demolition type things with lots of different machines so he is a handy person to know and a damn good bloke. Needless to say we jumped in his truck one morning and headed out to pick up my Midi DIY. It all came very neatly packed on a 1.2 by 1.2 by 1.2 pallet and was gently fork lifted into place on the Pig's truck and we were off to my place in no time.



If you have a look at the pic you can see my elbow is resting on the wheel that is at the base of the stand. Within the space of the stand is the dome and all the parts that go into making up the oven. Once I got to my house all I needed to do was unwrap the plastic and then unpack all the bits and bobs.



Additional to the bits and bobs as shown above, I also had the stand with heavy duty castors and also the slab that goes on the stand on which you build the oven.

Pig, my wife Andrea and I quickly set about getting everything off the truck as soon as we could which wasn't really a problem until you get to some of the heavy stuff. The bags of render are around the 40 - 50 kilo mark, the front section of the oven is around the same weight, the stand is probably around the 90 kilos and then you get to the dome.....130/140 kilos AND THEN the slab 140/150 kilos!

I also liked how the fire bricks are already assembled on the fire matt inside the dome but to unload everything you have to take them all out and stack them up, which I did. It was at this point I took a look at the instructions where they say – “before unpacking the fire bricks mark them so you can put them back together in the right order later” - oh well. 😊

If you buy a DIY kit it will come delivered on a pallet and hopefully the person who delivers it will have a hydraulic trolley so they can move the pallet to where you would like to unload it and close to where you will build your oven. For Elise and Jack their oven was delivered to the rear lane whereby they then needed to call up friends to come and help them cart it piece by piece up some stairs and into their courtyard. Luckily, they did not have the stand or slab to contend with although they did need four people to get the dome up the stairs and into their courtyard!

For me, everything was pretty straight forward, we got everything off the truck no problem but left the best till last – the slab and the dome. Remember I said Pig works in construction?? Well this was his area of expertise and with a little bit of thought, some lifting and some putting down we finally worked out how to get the slab onto the stand and the dome onto the slab without actually lifting them off the truck. We placed the stand at the back of the truck and then gently engaged the tipper tray, just enough, so that with a fair amount of muscle we slid the slab off the truck and onto the stand. Next, we manoeuvred the dome so that we sort of rolled it off the truck directly onto the dome!!



Unpacking finished.

The build has started although now need to work out how to turn over that 140 kilo dome??

Just a quick note: in the assembly instructions it says that if you have a concrete slab you will need to seal it with a concrete sealer. I got my slab from Alfresco and was unsure if they had sealed it at the factory so I gave them a call and they informed they hadn't. I was also unclear which way the slab should face so called them about that also, turns out it doesn't matter which way it faces rough side or smooth side up or down doesn't matter but you need to seal it with two coats before building on it.

Great customer service to Jonelle and Trent – nothing is a problem, they return calls or emails promptly and are a pleasure to deal with. Many Thanks.

Right on with the build.

Pig told me he would get around to my place at 8am to help with the assembly and build of the oven however he slept in and didn't get here till 9! That meant I had an hour to prepare things so the first thing I did was to get the fire matt, also known as the floor insulation, that the bricks sit on and work out how the bricks would fit on that. Once I had it all sorted, I then removed the bricks and lay them out on my table in the correct order and shape so when it came time to put them in the oven I would know what I was doing.





When Pig did arrive, and after I made him a coffee, the first port of call was to turn the dome over, get the insulation board in place and measure up and fit the front section of the oven into place. There are a couple of ways this can all be done.

First - you can put the fire bricks in order on the insulation board then lift the dome carefully over the top and pop it on. This was far too difficult for just two blokes.

Second - you can place the dome the correct way down on the slab then cut the insulation board in half so you can place it into the dome. Much easier to do but I didn't really want to cut the board.

Third – this is what we did. As the dome was already on the slab (very lucky for us as I didn't fancy lifting 140 kilos off the ground and onto the slab, definitely a four-person job) We manoeuvred the dome to the very edge of the slab then I got some cardboard and placed it under the back lip of the dome so as to protect the edge. With some delicate force – I say delicate force as there is a lot of weight in the dome and if we over did it the weight would have hurtled the dome over the edge of the slab. So with delicate force we rocked the dome over the lip or back edge then caught it before it slammed down and gently guided it down. We then lifted the front of the dome up enough to enable me to slide the two pieces of the insulation mat into place – the small crescent shape to the very back of the dome and the large matt butted up against that.



Elise and Jack opted to get four strong blokes to lift the dome onto their slab and then cut the insulation mat in half so they could put it into place.

The last part of this puzzle was to measure up and fit the front section of the dome (part number 2 in the pic of the DIY kit) As this is the front of the oven you want to set it forward on the slab but not flush to the end of the slab. Actually, it is your choice to set flush with the slab or not. I just like the look with the mouth of the oven being set back about 1cm from the edge of the slab. We also measured either side so as to centre the front section and the dome on the slab. If you set the front section and the dome too far back when you render the oven you will run out of slab at the back – something you really don't want to do. The following pic shows how far we set the oven back from the front of the slab.



The finished dome and front section with insulation mats in place.



The next job is to mix up the bag of fire cement into a nice consistent brew – as Trent says to a toothpaste like mix and then cement over where the dome and the front section meet. You do not need to cement in between the joint just over and around it.



Now comes the fiddly stuff - wrapping the oven in the fibre insulation! You will need to wear gloves as you will get bits of fibre sticking into you. I am not really sure how to explain how you do this, you really just need to jump in and wrap the oven up. In hindsight I probably would have cut the fibre sheeting into sections using a Stanley knife and then fitted them together so that it all sat nice and flush on the dome. There is a wire in the DIY kit that you can use to sew the edges together. You can also cut, rip, tear and separate the fibre sheeting so as to fit it into little cracks especially at the base of the dome and to fill any gaps between sections over the dome. As I said it is all a bit fiddly but very doable.



I did the cutting and Pig did the sewing. You can see that little gap at the back of the oven where it doesn't quite touch the slab, I filled that with torn pieces of the insulation so that there were no gaps anywhere.

Next up in the fiddly section of building this magnificent oven is covering the insulation with alfoil and then wrapping it all up in chicken wire. Trent says you can dampen the insulation with some water say from a spray bottle which helps the alfoil stick to it. Well, all very well and good but on a slightly windy day you need to have 8 arms to wrap the oven with the alfoil and keep it down! The hardest bit about the chicken wire is getting it to follow the curves of the oven and the only advice I can offer is keep going - a twist here and pinch there and in half an hour it will be okay!



Just so you know the alfoil is purely there to stop the insulation drawing moisture out of the render when it is applied and drying.

Now for the fun and messy part of the build – the Render! The most important part of the render is to mix all the dry ingredients really well and then add just enough water to get a sticky mix so that when you squish the render on the walls of the dome it will stick and not run off. If it is not wet enough it will not stick and if it is too wet it will slide off. So add a little water and mix well then apply to the dome and see how it works then if need be add a little more water mix well and test again.

Pig forgot to bring his trowel so we went for the hand rubbed render look which I think looks great and my wife thinks it looks rustic! Plan to get about 80% of the render you actually put on the oven to stick and plan on dropping 20% of it on the ground! You will have more than enough render to coat the oven. Once you have done the first render you will need to let it dry before applying the next coat. We had been working for about 3 hours so it was a good time to have lunch whilst we waited. The night before I had made a bbq'd seafood salad for my gorgeous wife so lunch was cool leftovers and I am glad to say Pig said it was delicious.

Luckily it was a warm day so after an hour we were ready to mix up and apply the second render – this is the render with the colour in it. Pig and I found that this render needed to be quite a bit wetter than the first render so that it would stick. Again, the best way is wetting, mixing and testing until you get the consistency that works. Trent adds a note in the instruction saying on hotter days you will need to make the mix wetter so maybe the afternoon was heating up. Having this render wetter also meant we could smooth it out a little better....in our hand rendered rustic way!!

First render



Second render – I chose the Terracotta colour because I reckon a rustic wood fired oven should be that colour!



Elise and Jack went for the Charcoal render and I must admit it looks very stylish!



All that is left to do is lay the bricks in, then put the front insulation and marble slab in. All very straight forward really especially as I had the fire bricks all laid out in the correct order! No problems except for the very last brick which needed some gentle tapping with a hammer and block of wood to coax it into place.



Note that lifting point hole you can see, we filled that in with the fire cement prior to putting the floor in.



All that is left to do – apart from clean up – is to glue the front insulation matt down and then glue the marble down then put in the flu.

I forgot to take pics of that bit but you can see below the finished front section.



After cleaning everything up I had a very enjoyable beer sitting back, looking at that beautiful Alfresco wood fired oven thinking of all the delicious things I was going to cook on it. Pizzas of course but also my own sour dough breads, slow roasted wood fired lamb shoulders, steaks over searing hot coals, one pot pork stews etc etc

So all up it took around 6 hours, or just under, of build time including an hour for lunch to put the oven together. Now I need to wait a week or so for the render to dry completely before I undertake two 6 hour burn in sessions. The first session is to take the oven up to around 150 degrees c over a 6 hour period and then the next day to take the oven up to 250 degrees c over 6 hours and then, I can get cooking!!!!

Big thanks to Pig for his help and my wife too and an even bigger thanks to Trent and Jonelle and the Alfresco team for not just making the best woodfired ovens around but also making it so fool proof to build your own. I reckon you save around \$1300 building it yourself and you get to tell people you made it in all its rustic glory!

That said the preassembled delivered ovens are very, very slick!

Cheers!