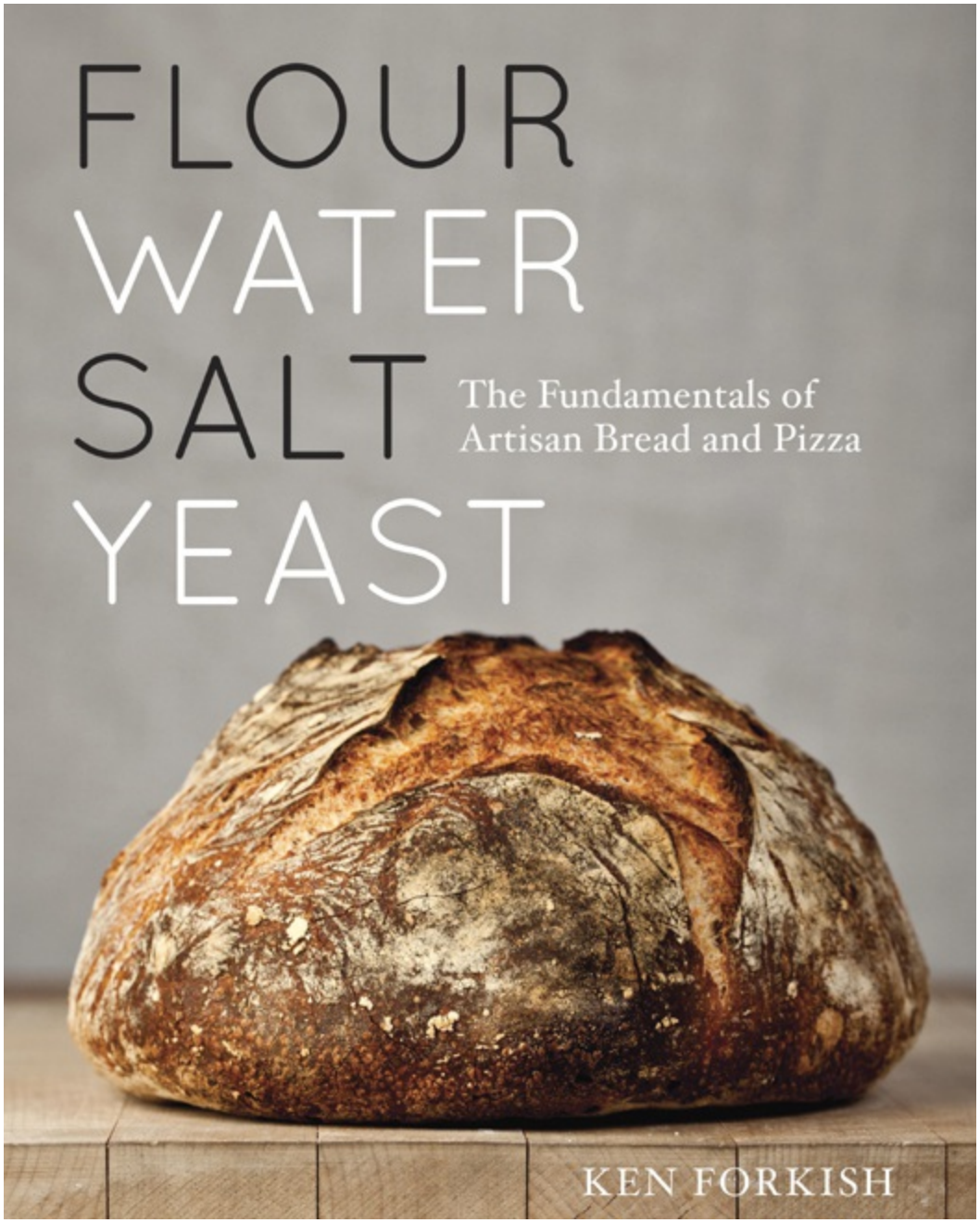
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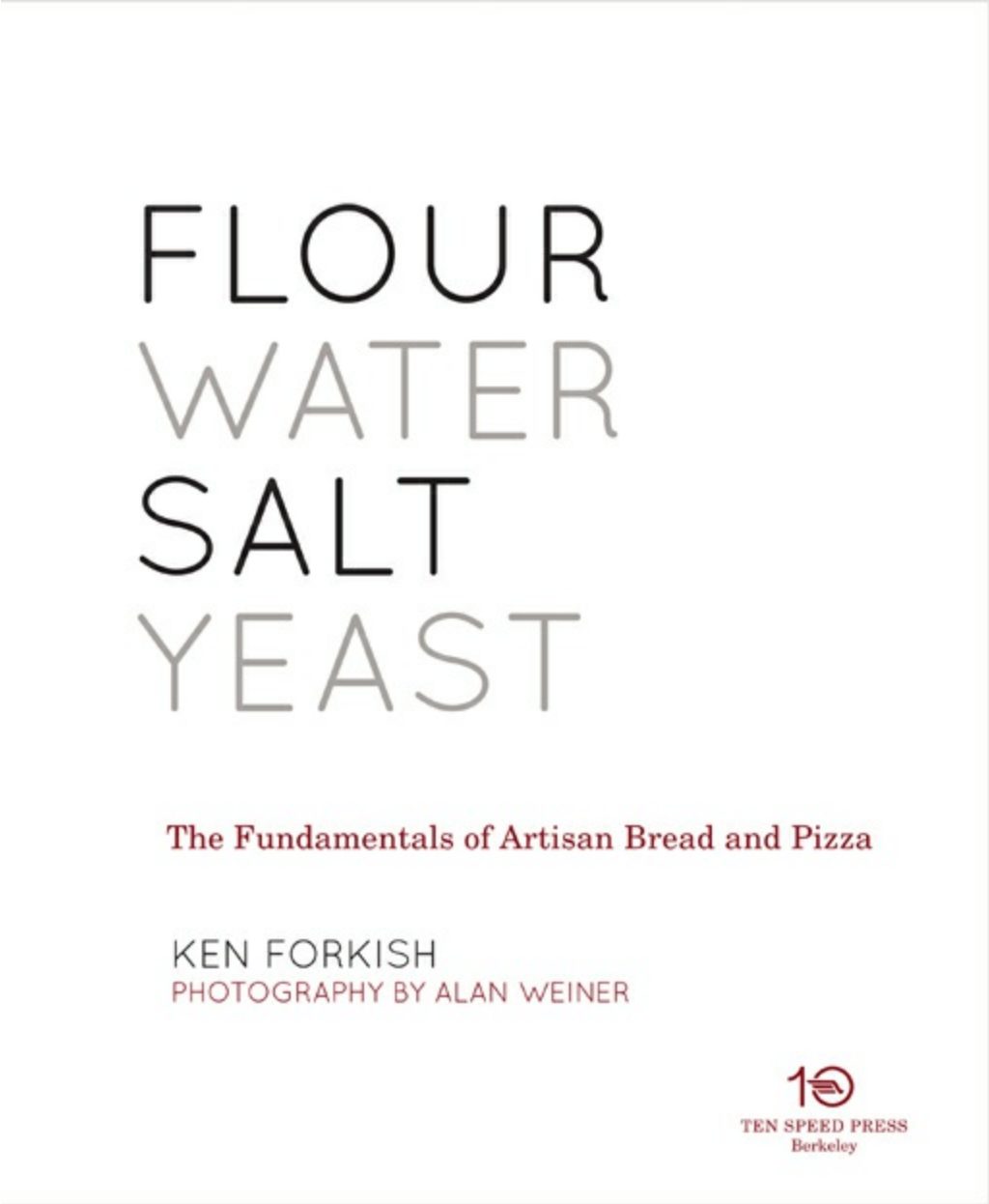
The Fundamentals of
Artisan Bread and Pizza
KEN FORKISH



Published in the United States by Ten Speed Press, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random

House, Inc., New York.

www.crownpublishing.com

www.tenspeed.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Forkish, Ken.

Flour water salt yeast : the fundamentals of artisan bread and pizza / Ken Forkish.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Bread. 2. Pizza. I. Title.

TX769.F67 2012

641.81’5—dc23

2012012080

eISBN: 978-1-60774-274-6

v3.1

To my parents, John and Frances Forkish

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

t’s been five hundred years since I opened Ken’s Artisan Bakery in Portland, Oregon.

IThat’s in bakery years, of course. My bakery actually opened in 2001. I had recently

left a nearly twenty-year corporate career for the freedom of running my own venture

and doing something I loved. In the time leading up to this risky transition, before I

knew what that venture would be, I yearned for a craft and wanted to make a living doing

something I could truly call my own. But I was itchy and I didn't know where to scratch!

For many years, I waited for that lightbulb moment of awareness that would signal an

open path worth taking. Then, in the mid-1990s, my best friend gave me a magazine

featuring the famed Parisian baker Lionel Poilâne. That article gave me the inspiration I

was looking for. Not long after that, I began making frequent trips to Paris, and I was

deeply inspired by the authentic, tradition-bound *boulangeries* I visited there. After a

few years and a series of evolving ideas, I ended up with a perhaps naive plan to open a

French bakery somewhere in the United States. My hope was to re-create the style and

quality of the best breads, brioches, croissants, *cannelés*, and other specialties found at

boulangeries and patisseries all over France.

My ensuing career transition was more Mr. Toad's Wild Ride than simple job change.

You could say I answered the call of that ancient Chinese curse: "May you live in

interesting times." But I came out on the other side with a firm love of the baker's craft,

acknowledging it as much more hard work than romance. The daily rhythms of life as a

professional baker, once nearly overwhelming, now provide comfort. The aromas, the

tactile nature of the work, and the way the finished products look takes me to a faraway

place that is still present, and to have that be the way I spend my days continues to thrill

me.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I was fortunate to train with many excellent bakers in the United States plus two in

France during the two-year between-careers period before I opened my own bakeshop in

Portland. What struck me during my professional baking training was that the most

important lessons I was learning—how to use long fermentation, pre-ferments, autolyse,

and temperature management, for example—were not discussed in any of the bread

books I had read. I later encountered books that did detail these things (like those by

Raymond Calvel and Michel Suas), but they were targeted to the professional. I was sure

that the techniques I had learned could apply to the home baker too.

In the years that followed the opening of Ken's Artisan Bakery, several notable baking

books were published. But I still saw an opportunity to address the techniques used in a

good artisan bakery and how they could be adopted for the home kitchen. I wanted to

write a book that didn't totally dumb down these techniques, since the concepts really

aren't that difficult for the nonprofessional baker to apply. And I wanted to break from

the mold prevalent in almost every bread book out there (at least until very recently): that

every recipe had to use a rise time of just one to two hours. Further, I was completely

motivated to demonstrate how good bread can be when it's made from just the four

principle ingredients: flour, water, salt, and yeast.

I also saw the opportunity to address how to make great bread at home with each of

the three principle techniques of dough fermentation: straight doughs, doughs made with

pre-ferments, and levain doughs, including an easy, unintimidating method for making a

levain culture from scratch in just five days using only whole grain flour and water.

In order to accurately use this book's recipes and follow its logic, I ask you to use an

inexpensive digital kitchen scale to execute the recipes and to help you understand

baking. One of the fundamentals of artisan baking is using weight measurements instead

of cups and tablespoons and being guided by the ratios of ingredients. (Don't worry, I do

all the simple math for you.) While the ingredients tables in each recipe do include

volume conversions, these measurements are by their nature imprecise (for reasons

explained in chapter 2) and they are included only to allow you to bake from this book

while you are contemplating which digital kitchen scale to buy.

My purpose in writing this book is twofold: First, I want to entice novices to bake, so

it is written for a broad audience. Total beginners can dive right in with one of the entry-

level recipes, the Saturday Breads, for example, right after reading chapter 4, Basic

Bread Method. Once you feel comfortable with the timing and techniques involved in

those breads, try recipes that involve an extra step, like mixing a poolish the night

before. Once you have mastered the poolish and biga recipes, try making a levain from

scratch and enjoy the particular pleasures of bread or pizza dough made with this culture.

By the time you work your way through this book, you will be baking bread in your home

kitchen that has a quality level approaching that of the best bakeries anywhere, along

with Neapolitan-style pizza that would make your *nonna* smile.

Second, this book is also written for more experienced bakers who are looking for

another approach to making dough—one that treats time and temperature as ingredients—

and who are perhaps looking for an accessible (or just different) method for making

great-tasting levain breads. Mixing dough by hand, a process used in all this book's

recipes, may also be new. To me, one of the most unique and important aspects of bread

baking is its tactile nature. In asking you to mix the dough by hand, I am also asking you

to think of your hand as an implement. Mixing by hand is easier than using a mixer, is

fully effective, and teaches you the feel of the dough. People have been mixing dough by

hand for thousands of years. If our ancestors did it, we can. And if you haven't done it

before, I hope you get great satisfaction from the process and feel a connection to the

past and the history of baking, like I do.

FUNDAMENTALS AND METHODS

When you read the recipes in this book, you'll see that they tend to be quite similar in

many regards. All of the breads and pizza doughs call for 1,000 grams of flour and often

have only slightly differing quantities of water and salt. Although they do vary in types of

flour used, in some cases the main differences are in type of leavening and the timeline

for development of the dough. Altering these variables can produce a wide variety of

breads from very similar formulas. The format of the ingredients lists is designed to help

you see these relationships. Basically, they are baker's percentage tables. As you'll

notice, the ingredients aren't always listed in the order in which they're used; rather,

flour, water, salt, and yeast are always listed in that order, descending by weight. This

allows you to compare recipes at a glance.

Each recipe in this book uses the same techniques for mixing, folding the dough,

shaping loaves, and baking, so it should be pretty easy to move from one fermentation

method in this book to another. As I committed to designing every bread recipe to make

round loaves baked in a Dutch oven, I realized that once readers become familiar with

my techniques, all of the recipes in this book become accessible, without the need to

learn new techniques for each recipe.

Whether you're a first-time baker or someone who already has two dozen bread books

on your shelf, this book explains how to use the same methods we use at Ken's Artisan

Bakery to make great bread at home. If you're a beginner and feel intimidated by some of

the tools or techniques used in my bread recipes, don't be! With a little bit of planning

(and maybe a few new pieces equipment, which I promise you'll use again and again),

you are well on your way to professional-quality bread.

Your Choice of Baking Schedules

The best breads are those with methods that allow plenty of time for flavor to develop.

Time does most of the work for you. Good flavors build while you sleep. Schedule

management, a critical aspect of a professional baker's life, applies in the home kitchen

too. But offering just a single schedule for making dough (for example, mixing the dough

in the evening, letting it develop overnight, shaping it in the morning, and baking a couple

hours later) may not work for you. So in this book, I provide recipes that operate on a

variety of schedules, each using a long fermentation time, so you can work with the

schedule that accommodates your other obligations. You can mix the dough in the

morning and bake in time for dinner, mix the dough in the evening and bake in time for

the next day's lunch, or mix the dough in the afternoon and bake loaves first thing the next

morning. Making these recipes does require a little planning, but each step of any given

recipe takes just a modest amount of time. Because of the extended schedules, many of

the recipes may only work for you on your weekend, but even if a recipe takes twenty-

four hours to prepare, it won't require constant attention.

Dutch Oven Baking

In the past, I struggled to bake bread in my home oven that had the texture, crust color,

and oven spring (the initial boost the dough gets in its first ten minutes in the hot oven,

caused by the last furious burst of yeast activity) we get at my bakery using the 15,000-

pound Italian deck oven, with steam at the push of a button. I owe a particular debt to

two recent books that introduced the use of Dutch ovens that fit inside a standard home

oven for baking crusty, colorful loaves: Jim Lahey's *My Bread* and Chad Robertson's

Tartine Bread. Each book recognizes that the previous techniques for home-baked hearth

bread, most often baked on a pizza stone with myriad methods for producing steam, were

insufficient for recreating the oven steam we enjoy as professional bakers.

The first time I baked in my two Dutch ovens, an Emile Henry enameled model and a

Lodge cast-iron model, I immediately decided to approach all the baking for this book in

the same way (save for pizza and focaccia, which *are* best on a baking stone—although

an iron skillet or sheet pan will also work). Simply placing a loaf in a preheated Dutch

oven and baking with the lid on allows the moisture from the dough to steam the loaf as it

bakes. The results are decidedly superior to those attained using a baking stone, yielding

great oven spring and a dark and beautiful crust with the right texture—thin and crisp. I

encourage you to bake until the crust develops dark crimson and ochre colors. Pull a loaf

out of the oven too soon and you may be losing out on the best flavors the crust has to

give.

Recipe Yields

Each of the bread recipes in this book makes two loaves. As I was testing the recipes my

home kitchen, I often found myself baking one loaf of bread and using the remaining

dough to make focaccia or pizza. Some people believe this is how focaccia originated,

with bakeries in Liguria using “extra” dough to make flat bread topped with whatever

was in season (or with olive oil and salt, or simply left plain). Some bread doughs are

more suited to or focaccia than others, so each recipe in this book advises you whether

you can pizza or focaccia with any extra dough, allowing you to get two great things to

eat from one dough mix.

Unique Recipes for Pizza and Focaccia

Pizza is a kind of bread too, and pizzas are a natural extension of the product line for

many bakers. Bakeries throughout Italy, for example, display pizza or focaccia with their

bread, often on a counter, sliced to order. The same principles of dough management that

apply to artisan bread baking apply equally to pizza—long, slow dough development for

the best flavor, color, and texture.

I love pizza! At my restaurant, Ken's Artisan Pizza, we make our pizza dough with the

same care as our bread dough, and in this book I have four pizza dough recipes, again

with varying schedules, using both store-bought yeast and a levain culture. The

techniques I use for making pizza dough are the same as those for bread dough. Start at

either end of the book; once you've learned how to make pizza or bread dough, it will be

a straightforward transition to learn the other.

USING THIS BOOK

All of the bread recipes in this book use the same basic techniques, and those are

described in detail in chapter 4, Basic Bread Method: weighing the ingredients,

autolysing (premixing) the flour and water, mixing the dough, applying folds, shaping

loaves, proofing, and baking. Chapter 8, Levain Method, describes how to start a new

levain culture and how to feed it, store it in the refrigerator, and restore it for its next

use. Chapter 12, Pizza and Focaccia Method, explains the techniques for making pizza

from the recipes in this book.

Basically, these three method chapters explain the “how” of the book’s recipes.

Chapter 2 explains the “what” and “why”—that is to say, the logic behind the methods

and the specific details that characterize artisan baking. If you want to cut to the chase

and just start baking bread, read chapter 4, Basic Bread Method, and then start with the

Saturday White Bread recipe. If you want to be better informed, spend some time with

chapter 2.

The Recipes

The recipes in this book are presented in three parts. Part 2, Basic Bread Recipes, offers

recipes for breads made with store-bought instant yeast. In chapter 5, you'll find recipes

for long-fermented simple doughs (called straight doughs), which vary in regard to the

blend of flours used and the schedule. In chapter 6, you'll find recipes for doughs made

with pre-ferments (specifically, biga and poolish), which take just a little more work

than straight doughs (five to ten minutes the evening before) but yield breads with more

complexity in flavor.

Part 3, Levain Bread Recipes, teaches you how to make a pungent, bubbly, and fully

effective levain culture from whole wheat flour and water in five days with little effort.

Creating your own starter culture is a fun science project that makes memorable, crusty,

beautiful loaves. Chapter 9 offers recipes for breads with hybrid leavening, which have

the unique character of levain breads but also incorporate commercial yeast to give the

bread a lighter crumb and a little extra lift. In chapter 10 you'll find recipes for pure

levain breads (i.e., breads that have no commercial yeast), and finally, in chapter 11,

you'll find two advanced levain recipes. As you work your way through part 3 of the

book, you'll learn how to manipulate the variables of a levain to achieve specific

qualities in the bread. Ultimately, you can use this information to create a bread that is

truly your own and matches your taste preferences, as described in the essay "Making a

Bread (or Pizza) Dough You Can Call Your Own".

Part 4, Pizza Recipes, is all about how to make delicious pizza and focaccia at home

using a pizza stone, a skillet, or a sheet pan. As mentioned, chapter 12 provides basic

methods for pizza and focaccia. In chapter 13 you'll find four dough recipes, and in

chapter 14 you'll find sauces and recipes for pizzas and focaccia with toppings. Use the

best ingredients—good flour, good cheese, San Marzano tomatoes—and follow my

instructions, and you'll be able to make excellent pizza at home. (Being spoiled by the

wood-fired oven at my restaurant, I high-fived my dog, Gomez, when I saw killer pizza

coming out of my standard home kitchen oven.) It's fun, and it really isn't hard to do. As

with making bread, making pizza is something you get better at with repeated efforts. It's

like a positive habit: do it and you want to do it again and again until you've mastered it.

Fun Bits to Add Flavor

Writing this book inspired me to riff on a few subjects: either experiences that I lived

through (like the failed attempt to open my first bakery) or things that fascinate me (like

the fact that a loaf of bread weighing over 6 pounds actually improves with age *and*

tastes better than smaller loaves made from the same dough).

Chapter 1 tells the tale of my journey from a Silicon Valley career to the hands-on

work of crafting rustic French bread as a professional baker. In part 1 of the book, you'll

find the essay "Where Does Our Flour Come From?" I take you on a tour of two of the

family farms that grow the wheat that gets milled into the flour we use at my bakery and

pizzeria. Evocative photography, commentary from the farmers, and a review of how

they manage their land brings home how people like Karl Kupers and Fred Fleming,

founders of Shepherd's Grain, are rethinking wheat farming to meet the needs of the land,

family farms, and bakers. People often want to know what goes on in the dark hours of

the early morning at the bakery. To satisfy that curiosity, in part 2 of the book I've given

you a detailed account of a morning representative of what's typical in "The Early

Morning Bread Baker's Routine." The essay offers a voyeuristic peek into the nonstop

synchronized activity of our bakery.

In part 3 of the book I've included the essay "The 3-Kilo Boule," explaining why I

love these massive loaves and share some of their interesting history. My hope is that

this book will provide you not only with recipes for bread that will truly impress you,

but also a clear understanding of the processes we use at Ken's Artisan Bakery and how

they apply in the home kitchen. Once you have this foundation of knowledge, you can use

the information in the essay "Making a Bread (or Pizza) Dough You Can Call Your

Own" (also in part 3) to craft your own unique breads.

Baking is a craft that makes you want to do it again and again, trying various flour

blends, improving your shaping technique, or simply following the same procedure but

trying to do it better with each repetition to improve the flavor of your bread, the volume

of the loaf, or perhaps the color of the crust. Repetition is part of the pleasure. And once

you get a rhythm and learn the techniques, the repetition gives a warming satisfaction that

comes from the familiar comfort of doing something well. *Bon appétit*.

PART 1

THE PRINCIPLES OF ARTISAN BREAD

CHAPTER 1

THE BACKSTORY

t was exhilarating when I quit the last job I hated. I was ready to move on and leap into

Ithe unknown future of my life as a baker. Unexpectedly, however, the dream took a

detour—or maybe just a longer, more scenic route.

THE KERNEL OF THE IDEA

Flash back to 1995: I was wearing a suit every day, trying to meet my sales quota each

year, and drinking the company Kool-Aid. One day that year, my buddy Tim Holt gave

me a copy of the January issue of *Smithsonian* magazine, which featured a cover article

about the famed Lionel Poilâne. Reading the article, I realized I had found my muse.

Poilâne was a French baker running his father's bakeshop at 8 rue du Cherche-Midi on

Paris's Left Bank. Lionel coined the phrase "retro-innovation" as a measure of progress.

He was possessed by the old-world ways of making great bread: using human hands,

time, and fire as an artisan's instruments. These techniques required patience, and they

had largely been neglected in postwar France as industrialized baking methods were

widely adopted and the quality of French bread, long an icon, declined.

With his genius for promotion and his passionate embrace of bread made in the old

way (*pain d'autrefois*), Lionel Poilâne helped repopularize rustic country breads,

naturally leavened, made by hand, and baked in wood-fired ovens by men who worked

hard in hot, steamy basements at a physically demanding job. (Ask these guys about the

romance of baking!) His was the craft of an artisan. Poilâne's ingredients were stone-

milled wheat flour, water, and sea salt. A 1.9-kilo *miche* could last an entire week.

Miche A large, rustic *boule*, or round loaf of bread, which can

weigh 3 kilograms (6.6 pounds) or more.

His earthy breads were described as having a winelike complexity, and people lined

up on the sidewalk to buy them from the iconic *boulangerie*. A charismatic and

knowledgeable promoter, Lionel replicated the wood-fired oven routines of his family's

boulangerie on a large scale outside of Paris during the 1980s and began shipping his

big round loaves around the world, baking about fifteen thousand loaves a day in twenty-

four wood-fired ovens. Lionel's brother, Max Poilâne, went on to open his own

wonderful *boulangerie* in Paris' 15th arrondissement. The two brothers made near-

identical loaves the way their father had taught them to: in big rounds weighing almost 2

kilos (4.4 pounds) apiece. (Sadly, Lionel, his wife, Irena, and their dog died in 2002

when the helicopter Lionel was piloting crashed during a fierce storm in high winds off

the coast of Brittany.) Both brothers—along with many other Parisian bakers, I later

discovered—were fueled by traditionalist convictions about bread baking that inspired

me. And even though I'd never worked as a craftsman or had any kind of job related to

food, as I held the magazine in my hands I knew instantly, at a very deep level, that being

this kind of baker was right for me. It was a certainty like none I had ever experienced.

Prior to reading the Poilâne piece in *Smithsonian*, my personal experience with

baking bread was a recipe for an herb bread with dill, anise deeds, parsley, and a lot of

sugar. The method involved using a whisk—a *whisk!* I made that bread often, and at the

time, I liked it. But I had no reference point for bread at its best, and it was unlikely to be

found in the United States anyway. When I lived in London in 1989 and often traveled in

Europe for my job at IBM, I loved looking in the windows of pastry shops, butchers, and

cheese shops and eating foods specific to the place I was in. I found these markets

inspiring and could tell they had been making the same great food in the same way for

generations. I asked myself why we didn't have places like these at home and whether I

could perhaps someday bring some of the transcendent goodness, quality, and timeless

character of these shops back home in a venture of my own. But I had only strands of

ideas—nothing concrete that rang true.

I remember sitting in my backyard in Virginia under a cherry tree in full bloom on a

warm, sunny spring afternoon, reading my first issue of the quarterly newsletter of the

Bread Bakers Guild of America. Cue the chirping bluebirds. The Poilâne piece in

Smithsonian had inspired me to join the guild as an entry point into the world of good

bakers. Reading about serious professionals baking good bread spoke to my soul—and

fueled fantasies of rising at 3 a.m. to bake bread. *(What are you, nuts?!)* This issue of

the newsletter had a feature on Lionel Poilâne's visit to the guild's annual dinner,

another on the U.S. baking team winning the bread category for the first time at the Coupe

du Monde de la Boulangerie, and an excellent piece by the original seer of the Guild,

Tom McMahon, about the importance of connection between bakers and the farmers who

grow their wheat (a connection I finally achieved ten years later when I switched to

Shepherd's Grain flours). Tom had a clear, high-level vision that promoted his ideals of

advancing both the quality of bread and environmental responsibility. Throughout the

newsletter—my first glimpse into the minds of the bakers and owners of good artisan

bakeries—I detected a sense of mission and passion. It helped water the seed of my

desire first sown by the *Smithsonian* article about Poilâne. I finished reading the

newsletter, and I still remember how, at that very time, it seemed right that I should

become one of them.

Until I escaped the corporate womb and became a baker in earnest, I did what I could

to learn about the world of artisan baking from the outside looking in. I visited many

bakeries in Paris during trips there, two or three times each year. (I had a Parisian

girlfriend—how convenient!) I bought baking books. My heroes were French bread

bakers: Moisan, Poujauran, Kamir, Ganachaud, Kayser, Gosselin, Saibron, and others.

In the late 1990s I read about a couple of bakeries in northern California: Della

Fattoria and Bay Village Bakery. They baked the kind of bread I wanted to bake, in

wood-fired ovens (I was absolutely certain that I was going to be a wood-fired oven

baker like Poilâne—a certainty later changed by a firmer grip on reality) and their bake

houses were in their backyards. I thought that sounded perfect! After two decades of big

city commuting on jammed freeways, the thought of walking across my backyard to get to

work was alluring to say the least. These bakeries were also idealistic, as mine would

be, using organic flour and employing the best-quality methods to make the finest bread

they knew how to bake. And they were successful. Della Fattoria was selling bread to

the French Laundry in Napa (this was before Thomas Keller opened Bouchon Bakery).

Bay Village was developing a reputation for having the best rustic breads in the country,

and Chad Robertson was mobbed every time he went to the farmers' market in Berkeley

to sell his bread.

I knew that I needed to learn how to bake bread at this level, and my Bread Bakers

Guild newsletters made it clear that the best options were at the San Francisco Baking

Institute and the newly opened (and now closed) National Baking Center in Minneapolis.

I wanted to learn from multiple people and then adapt the collage of lessons into my own

baking style. In August of 1999, soon after chucking my last job, I was off to the San

Francisco Baking Institute to take Artisan Breads I and II, two weeks of hands-on

instruction. I'd finally made the break from my corporate career and I was a free man

about to learn a new trade. A free man. Maybe a little crazy.

LEARNING THE CRAFT

I'll never forget my first day at the institute. Ian Duffy, our instructor, had us each mix a

small amount of dough by hand—wet, sticky dough. I was trying to work the dough the

way Ian did: his hands developed it, turned it, and folded it, and before long it was a

smooth ball with an outside skin soft and smooth as a baby's bottom. Then I'd try, and

I'd have dough sticking everywhere. No soft, baby's-butt dough skin, just a red face and

an oh-shit-what-was-I-thinking exclamation point in my head. That night I went to my

hotel more than a little worried that maybe this wasn't the career for me. But by the end

of two weeks I could handle the dough okay, and with all of the great instruction I'd

received, I thought that with a lot of practice at home maybe I could start to get the feel

for this stuff.

While I was in northern California, I met Chad Robertson and Elisabeth Prueitt (now

quite famous for their work at Tartine in San Francisco) at Bay Village Bakery in Point

Reyes, and Chad and I began a conversation that lasted for years about levains, milling,

French versus American flour, and the fermentation needed to bake the kind of old-

school French country bread I was after. Chad's bread was the best I'd ever had in the

United States. It was baked to a dark chestnut brown and had gentle flavors of wheat and

fermentation, and the character of the crust seeped into the soft, light interior. It tasted

fantastic, and it was beautiful too. I thought his bread was in league with that of the best

boulangeries I had visited in Paris.

Chad did all of his bread baking as a solo act. After a ten-second commute through his

yard, he mixed the levain and the doughs, chopped wood, built the fire for the oven, and,

many hours later, swept out the oven to prepare it for baking. In the filtered sunlight of a

Marin afternoon, Chad divided and shaped his dough by hand. The next morning he

would bake magnificent bread in the intense radiant heat of his oven, loading loaves in

and out on a peel by hand. I left that first visit with Chad nodding my head up and down

and thinking, “Yeah, this is it for me.”

Next I stopped to visit Della Fattoria in Petaluma, California, where they were baking

dramatic round loaves decorated with grape leaves, destined for the annual Sonoma

Valley Harvest Wine Auction. I stood out of their way as they baked these loaves in

side-by-side wood-fired ovens built and designed by Alan Scott—the same kind Chad

had at Bay Village. I was taking pictures, and if there was something I could do to help

them out, I did it. The bakery, run by Ed and Kathleen Weber and their son Aaron, is in

the most idyllic setting. The bake house is attached to their home on fifteen acres of

Petaluma farmland, with beautifully tended gardens and a lot of small, life-is-good

details that showed me they were living a great life on their own terms, and it was paid

for by baking good bread. Again, I thought, “Yeah, this is it for me.” I rode with Ed as he

delivered the loaves to the auction, and when I came back Aaron asked if I wanted to

come bake with them for a week or two. What a great offer! This was my first chance to

spend time in a live craft bakery, and the Webers were extremely generous and

forthcoming. It’s fun to look back on those days—getting up at 5 a.m. and walking toward

my future, down the Webers’ lawn to the bake house, staring up at a night full of brilliant

stars, about to be humbled by more sticky dough.

After my informal “apprenticeship” with the Webers (really, just one week), I was

ready to continue my instruction. I knew I was going to need more pastry skills, and the

National Baking Center in Minneapolis had two great instructors, Philippe Le Corre

teaching pastry, and Didier Rosada teaching advanced bread baking classes. Two weeks

there, plus a one-week pastry class with Robert Jorin at the CIA in Napa, rounded out

my formal training. Chad and Liz, after they moved Bay Village Bakery to a retail spot in

Mill Valley, were also very generous sharing many of their lessons, and they let me

observe their bakery's operation during multiple visits. Without their help my first years

at my own bakery would have been even more challenging than they ended up being, and

their quality was the gold standard that I aspired to. This kind of give-back and sharing,

while being pretty common in the food service trade, is totally not what happens in the

last industry I worked in. Small business has so much more heart than big business.

It was time for me to set up a wood-fired oven in my own backyard bakery. Not long

before, I had moved into the perfect setting to be near the rest of my family, who had all

migrated to Eugene, Oregon. I had a cool house on five acres with a 1,200-square-foot

outbuilding that I could convert into a bake house. The zoning allowed for a small home

business, and the house wasn't part of any homeowners' association that might have

rules against this kind of thing. It looked like a great setup. Plus, I had time to learn the

craft, convert the outbuilding, and, before too long, begin my career as a baker—or so I

thought.

BUT FOR THE SMELL OF BAKING BREAD

When I moved to Eugene, I assumed all I needed to do to start my enterprise was get a

business license, build the bakery, and begin to bake bread. To my surprise, a community

uprising against my little venture developed, and the intense energy with which my

neighbors pursued their goal created a public NIMBY fuss that landed on the front page

of the newspaper, on the local TV news, and in a pair of two-hour public hearings

where one neighbor after another took the stand to rage against, among other things,

having to smell bread baking every single day: “like Sisyphus, pushing the same rock up

the hill, every day into eternity,” according to their attorney. Smoke from my chimney

stack was going to exaggerate respiratory problems for one family, whose house was

several hundred yards away. Sparks from the chimney were going to burn down the

entire neighborhood. The bakery would turn into a tourist attraction, causing too much

traffic in the neighborhood. My driveway was too steep for a fire truck to navigate in the

event of a fire. Ashes from my oven were going to change the pH balance of the soil.

Trash from the bakery was going to attract rodents. It was an Alice in Wonderland

construct where just saying something makes it true; the process seemed to me to be

anything but a court of rational appeal.

The residents of eleven out of eighteen homes in the small neighborhood wrote letters

protesting the plans for the bakery. Here is a favorite excerpt of mine:

Flour dust can be very explosive. A dropped bag of raw flour can be ignited in

much the same way as volatile fluids. This may be one of the hazards of baking, but

it does not belong in a residential area.

In the course of due process, the legal burden was on me to refute any and all claims,

no matter how seemingly absurd, like the exploding bags of flour. I produced a certified

letter from the State of Oregon's climatologist identifying the direction of prevailing

winds by month. (Away from the neighbors 44 percent of the time, but that didn't account

for days of air stagnation, it turns out. *Who knew?*) I had certification from an

environmental engineering firm stating that the emissions output from the oven would be

no greater than that from a standard woodstove. I should have tried tossing a bag of flour

in the courtroom to see if it would explode.

After a pair of lengthy public hearings, four months of angst, and county files at least

eighteen inches thick, the final ruling was to deny my application for a business license

to run my little bakery in a zone that allowed home businesses. It was time to shift mental

gears.

"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Immediately, I was anxious to put Eugene in my rearview mirror. Too bad about the

house; I loved that place. But where to? I decided to start with a fresh plan and give up

on the idyllic and admittedly safer route of opening a low-expense backyard startup. I

embarked on a mission to find a new town in which to open my idealized retail bakery.

To finance this ambitious—and expensive—venture, I would sell my house and apply

most of my savings, risking everything I had. I wanted to move somewhere I might

actually be welcomed, where people would appreciate buttery croissants that shatter

when you bite into them, crisp *cannelés* perfumed with vanilla and beeswax, and rustic

country breads—a place where nobody would complain about the smell of baking bread.

Where would it be?

IN SEARCH OF PORTLAND

I drew up a list of things the town needed to have: good weather (hindsight snicker), an

active restaurant scene that wasn't stodgy, and a good farm-to-table sense. After a six-

month quest, which included stops in San Luis Obispo, Yountville, Boulder, Denver,

Maryland's Eastern Shore, and Monterey, as well as two weeks of training at l'Institut

Paul Bocuse in France (yes, I got to meet the man, at his restaurant, and yes, his big beefy

hands rested on my shoulders for a photo that I never received—sounds like a fish story,

I know), I finally settled on Portland.

I barely knew the place, but it had me hooked for reasons my future self would

understand better than I did at the time. Now, I realize that I was drawn to Portland

because so many of its craftsmen were (and still are) doing production on a smaller, less

industrial scale, with a focus on quality. Our hands are our most important tools. Our

customers can associate names and faces with the food they eat and the beverage they

drink. These things are characteristic of the word "artisan" and a principal reason why I

named my bakery "Ken's Artisan Bakery." In Portland, it is not unusual to know who

made the beer or wine we are drinking, the cheese we are eating, or the salami on our

pizza—and that's how I knew it was the place for me.

That said, it is difficult enough to open a restaurant or bakery in a town you know and

make it work—especially if you have no history in that line of work. Going into a city

where nobody knew me was absolutely insane. But I had a bad case of tunnel vision and

I could only see the light at the end: my own bakery in a place I was pretty sure I'd love.

Over a three month period, with layout and design help from Michel Suas of TMB

Baking (a sister company of the San Francisco Baking Institute), I built the bakery in a

shell of a space in an old neighborhood in Portland filled with bars and restaurants. My

oven, the big mixer, and the other major equipment I'd ordered all arrived together in a

single container that entered the United States at the port of Newport News, Virginia, and

then came to me on a flatbed truck. The truck arrived at about 8 o'clock on a cold, rainy

weekday night in early November. Along with a team of new hires and our superhero

installer, Carlos, I met the driver in front of the bakery and unloaded the truck with a

rented forklift. The delivery was a day later than expected. I remember the driver calling

from outside Boise, Idaho, letting me know he had a bad toothache and needed to see a

dentist but was going to drive through the night to get to me. I had images of the Italian

oven and French mixer I had been waiting for all those months, which had traveled from

Europe by boat, toppling down some mountain pass between toothache and here.

All of the equipment was installed in mid-November 2001, and we opened on

November 21. New hires all around me and I was running the place—my first food job.

The shock of the previous two years—misfiring in Eugene, figuring out where to open

my bakery, selling my house in Eugene, finding a space in Portland, and getting the place

up and running—then suddenly being open and selling bread and pastry? Whoa, that's a

big one. But in one moment the past was behind me, and all that mattered was getting

people in the door. Ken's Artisan Bakery was born.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The neighborhood where the bakery was located had the highest population density of

any place between Seattle and San Francisco. But the neighborhood was filled with

modest rental apartments, and the per capita income data concerned me. I was going to

compete on quality, not price. We opened just two months after September 11. During a

recession. And the carb-fearing Atkins and South Beach diets were peaking in

popularity. Portland set a record for most consecutive days with measurable rain. The

unemployment rate was around 12 percent at the time. Today, an ambitious bakery

opening would get instant media attention. At that time it barely got a mention. So we had

an intermittent trickle of customers, friends, and family coming through the door, along

with curious passersby and a few drunks.

Some people appreciated our efforts, recognized our ambitions, and understood the

quality of our ingredients and our intention to produce bread and pastry according to my

idealized vision. Now, I tend to remember the things that went wrong more than the

things that went right. Our first sheeter, used to laminate croissant and puff pastry dough,

was too small. Making it work required that we prop boards on overturned trash cans at

either end to catch the dough as it ran back and forth between the rollers. The *cannelés*

were inconsistent, but when they were on they were fantastic. We were baking all of our

pastries in the deck oven, and constantly reaching into the oven's upper decks for sheet

pans gave us all a series of nasty accidental sheet pan burns on our forearms.

I arrived at 4 a.m. each morning, mixed the baguette dough, helped with the morning

pastry work, and baked levain breads that had been chilled overnight. Then I divided,

shaped, and baked baguettes, with the first batch coming out of the oven around 8:30 a.m.

People who came in at 8 or 8:15 a.m. were often angry or dismayed that the baguettes

weren't ready yet and sometimes taunted us with comments like "You call yourself a

French bakery?" I absolutely couldn't arrive at the bakery any earlier than 4 a.m., and

although I could have theoretically put the baguettes in the oven before 8 o'clock, they

wouldn't have been as good. Still, the accusatory glares were hard to take. Our French

customers were the most aggravated. I needed to know what people thought of our stuff,

but these comments kind of pissed me off, too. It was an open bakery. We were

vulnerable to impressions of all kinds.

The retarder, a walk-in cooler where all of the shaped levain breads spend the night

for a long, slow, cool fermentation, had some idiosyncrasies. Every week, on Monday, it

would shut down. Without telling me first. Before Christmas in 2001 we were closed

Mondays, so I never noticed. Of course, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve fell on a

Monday that year. On Christmas Eve morning, I arrived at the bakery a little early, just

before 4 a.m., looking forward to baking and selling bread that would be on people's

holiday tables. Then I opened the door to the retarder and was greeted by a blast of

warm, humid, slightly sour air and loaves overflowing their proofing boards, totally