

# THE WINE NEWS

## cuisine

### Artisan Bread - Crafted by Tradition, Baked with Devotion

*By Carole Kotkin*



Amy's Bread, located in New York City, boasts a restaurant client roster that reads like a critic's four-star list; its crusty loaves are not only hand-crafted, most are made with certified organic or unbleached flours and natural starters.

To break bread is an act of sharing. To tear into warm, crusty, handcrafted bread is an ineluctable element of a fine-dining experience. But to choose the perfect loaf to accompany a meal? That's a decision that can be almost as important as making the right wine pairings. Purchasing a precious loaf of freshly baked bread, however, is becoming far easier than tracking down that elusive boutique bottle.

Happily, thanks to America's burgeoning community of artisanal bread bakers, a host of Old World-style bakeries is flourishing. The movement, based on the irresistible appeal of fashioning by hand a product so basic to human life, has steadily been gaining devotees.

Artisan breads provide pleasures that have warmed hearts and sustained souls throughout the ages. Aesthetically, these handhewn loaves are as beautiful as they are delicious - as variously colored as the earth, with powdery tan flour on the ridges, brown in the valleys and beige beneath the crust. In terms of nutrition, no preservatives, conditioners or enhancers are added to the basic doughs, so artisan breads meet consumers' demand for healthy as well as authentic foods. Texturally, these hearty breads, crusty outside and chewy inside, are a great complement to almost any dish: Even with a simple soup or sandwich, they assert whole-grain flavor and add dimension. Fermented breads, such as sourdough, are important factors in basic but robust recipes such as goat cheese crostini, tomato-basil bruschetta or panzanella (bread salad).

The revival of artisan baking techniques actually began about two decades ago on the West Coast, but to the newcomer, it seems almost overnight that American bakers started crafting European-style loaves from centuries-old recipes - a craft we practically lost with the advent of white bread mass production in the 1920s. For more than half a century thereafter, bread was

largely made in factories where commercial yeasts guaranteed quick and consistent results. "The American baking industry drifted away from the traditional breads that had been the center of peoples' lives," observes Steve Sullivan, owner of Acme Bread Company in Berkeley. "Fortunately, the industry has snapped back to handmade and time-honored systems to make breads." Today, the varieties of artisan breads, by their simplest definition, are seemingly endless: hand-formed bagels, challah (Jewish egg bread), brioche and croissants, in addition to sweet doughs like savarin, kugelhof and cinnamon rolls, to name several.

Improved wheat cultivation and oven construction have helped spawn bread's renaissance. According to Peter Reinhart, author of the award-winning *The Bread Baker's Apprentice*, "The bread revolution was made up of three waves, beginning in the late 1960s with the whole-grain counter-culture or health movement [resulting] in hippie restaurants and bakeries. The 1970s is what I call the 'traditional wave,' when European chefs were coming here and we were going to Europe and attending culinary schools. In the 1980s, we saw the 'neo-traditional wave,' bringing together traditional techniques with American creativity and a sense of freedom and new discovery."

One such neo-traditionalist, artisan bread doyenne Nancy Silverton, opened her 1,200-square-foot La Brea Bakery in Los Angeles in 1989. She had intended only to supply bread and desserts to Campanile, the adjacent restaurant she had founded with husband, Mark Peel, also in 1989. But by 1992, her bakery, in a then-new 22,000-square-foot location, was turning out 35,000 pounds of handcrafted fresh bread daily. Monetary success followed: Last year, the Irish food giant IAWS Group agreed to buy an 80 percent stake in La Brea for \$68.5 million. (Silverton will still be involved and retains the original 1,200-square-foot La Brea Bakery.)

Likewise, Sullivan, who started as a busboy at Chez Panisse in 1973 and eventually became that restaurant's baker, realized in 1983 that "the interest in better bread was not being met. There were small retail bakeries and large commercial bakeries, but nothing in between. I wanted a bakery that would supply restaurants with a product that didn't exist in America." His instincts were correct. With a commitment to quality and attention to detail, he has seen his Acme Bread Company grow exponentially. Sullivan now has three wholesale locations and one retail outlet, and boasts a client list of the San Francisco-area's best restaurants - establishments such as Chez Panisse, Zuni Café, Boulevard and Greens. He even regularly works with farmers on which grain varieties to grow, and uses "identity preserved" wheat, which is to bread what single-vineyards are to wine.

Still, when artisan breads first began appearing on restaurant tables, few Americans were trained in the specialized techniques required to make them. That scenario provided the impetus for the National Baking Center at Dunwoody in Minneapolis, the only not-for-profit baking facility in the country that focused solely on traditional, non-industrial bread baking.

Unfortunately, the school closed in 2001, but today there are several others,

both not-for-profit and for-profit, and many artisan baking programs in culinary schools nationwide. Perhaps the most widely known group, The Bread Bakers Guild of America ([www.bbga.org](http://www.bbga.org)) was formed in 1993 by suppliers of ingredients and equipment, artisan bakers, store operators and educators, all who feel that "the best thing since sliced bread" should not refer to plastic-wrapped commercial loaves. In the past decade, the membership of The Guild has increased from 450 to 1,300.

A founding board member of The Guild, Amy Scherber, co-owner of the ten-year-old Amy's Breads in New York City, believes that serving artisan bread makes a statement about quality and good taste, even in the most casual restaurants. When her signature semolina loaf dotted with golden raisins and fennel or her black olive twist is presented, the diner can inhale the wonderful fragrance and savor the taste and texture. This, says Scherber, "excites the senses and whets the appetite for the exciting dishes to come." Scherber sells a full line of artisan organic breads and rolls and many non-organic selections to wholesale and retail shops in Manhattan and Brooklyn, as well as to regional restaurateurs.

Scherber's roster - Aquavit, Union Square Café, Gramercy Tavern, Union Pacific and Savoy - is a testament not only to her superb products, but to the fact that chefs want breads that support the concepts of their restaurants and convey their commitment to top-notch ingredients. Indeed, the once-humdrum breadbasket has morphed into a carefully composed still life full of tantalizing shapes and textures. Often a waiter will appear bearing a more elaborate bread tray, presenting the choices - crusty sourdough bread, crunchy multigrain studded with poppy seeds, pine nuts and sesame; crisp demi-baguettes, dense and chewy walnut-raisin; and tender ciabatta - with as much panache as one would expect of the cheese service.

"Bread is the first food someone receives in a restaurant. It can be a wonderful calling card," says executive chef Nancy Oaks of Boulevard, the stylish but informal San Francisco brasserie. "People judge you by the quality of that first impression and it's an added element to customer satisfaction," she says.

Peter Hoffman, executive chef-owner of Savoy in New York, agrees. "We serve 'handmade' food, and having bread that reflects this philosophy is important to us." Nor is he only talking about the bread service. Savoy's international menu allows Hoffman to present grilled breads with skordalia (Greek potato dip) and grilled shiitake mushrooms and manouri cheese on multigrain breads. At certain times of the year, he serves savory, artisan bread puddings. And Oaks receives two orders a day of immense sourdough loaves from Sullivan's Acme Bakery, which she employs for crostini, croutons, and as a base for foie gras and sweetbreads.

In practicing their craft, artisan bakers generally find pre-fermented breads, called pain au levain in France but commonly referred to in the United States as sourdough, to be the most popular among consumers. "Sourdough has a complex fragrance, a crustier crust and a chewiness you can't get with other dough," says Maggie Glezer, author of *Artisan Baking Across America*. To

make them, bakers rely on just four ingredients: flour, water, starter and salt. The trick is in the details - everything from choosing the flour (often organic) to deciding how much water (frequently purified) and what kind of fermentation to use. The loaves can take up to three days to mix, proof, shape and bake. That gives the yeast time to develop flavor and the gluten or protein in the bread time to form a web-like structure. The longer it takes to make the bread, the better its complexity. The manner in which bakers manipulate these slower leavenings is the core of their art. The late Parisian bread baker Lionel Poilane believed, "What many bakers don't realize is that good wheat can make bad bread. The magic of bread baking is in the manipulation and the fermentation."

Starter, a partial dough that is begun before the bread dough itself is mixed, is the essence of American sourdough. Unlike most bread, which rises with the aid of commercial yeast, sourdough bread is made by encouraging the growth of naturally occurring microflora, wild yeast spores and bacteria that live both in the air and in the flour itself, by mixing the flour with water or milk. The concoction turns sour; hence the name.

Part of that starter is used to make the bread; the rest is kept alive by continually adding more flour and water. In this manner, starters can be maintained for years and are often passed on from one bread baker to the next like a baton. Scherber says her 100-year-old starter can be traced to its origin, a ranch in Idaho.

Of course, starters don't have to be handed down (or around). They can be built up from just flour and water, or with the addition of other ingredients, such as honey or milk or red grapes. And using this starter doesn't mean the bread's predominant taste is sourness.

A good pain au levain has a slight sourness, but actually more of a grain or earthy flavor. (Glezer notes, however, that "the French would consider many American sourdoughs trop acide, too sour.") In breads that are usually made with a starter but aren't necessarily considered sourdough, such as walnut raisin, pumpernickel, flatbreads or focaccia, one might not even notice the sourness at all.

In fact, like many fermented products, the starter and resulting bread become deeper with time. "A bread baker's work can be compared to that of a winemaker," explains Scherber. "The grapes make a great aromatic base for the starter and, like wine, there is a perfect time of fermentation. Too far and the bread collapses; not enough and the bread will not be flavorful. And, like the winemaker, you must know exactly when to stop."

If a starter is relocated to a new environment, it takes on the characteristics of those surroundings in a few weeks. For example, a starter made from the famous wild yeasts of San Francisco will create a different bread if it's baked in New York because microbes in the air and the water are dissimilar, just as Cabernets grown in those two regions differ greatly in their flavor profiles. As with wine, these sourdough breads really are a product of their terroir.

Variables such as elevation and humidity also matter, as do baking methods, which play a major role in achieving proper texture. A bona fide artisan loaf should have an inconsistent cell structure - both large and small "holes" - a necessary counterpoint to lend satisfying mouth-feel. Thus, these European-style breads generally can't be made without a hearth oven (a masonry vault) or a modern version of one in which heat radiates all around the bread. Reinhart believes that the next trend in professional bread baking is the proliferation of wood-fired hearth ovens, which are similar to Neapolitan pizza ovens. (Neapolitan pizza dough, incidentally, is considered a form of artisan bread.) Generally, a fire is built underneath what is called the "deck," then loaves are placed directly on the deck rather than in pans. Such ovens have built-in steam injectors that add moisture to soften and protect the dough. A steamy oven helps caramelize the sugars in the dough to give the crust a golden color and an overall shiny appearance. Home bakers can approximate this environment by placing a pan of water on the oven floor or tossing in a few ice cubes.

Timing is particularly important. Glezer says the most common mistake novice bakers make is underbaking. "Dark crusts are an important flavor element," she explains. "Fifty percent of flavor is lost if a dark crust is eliminated. The darker the crust is, the more flavorful the bread."

In general, most of us prefer to buy our artisan breads from the devoted bakers who have perfected their craft. Indeed, on a global scale, American breads have improved so much that the United States bread-making team, organized by The Bread Bakers Guild of America, has garnered major awards at Coupe du Monde de la Boulangerie, a baking competition held in Paris, including first place in the Baguette and Specialty Breads category in 1996 and the overall gold medal in 1999.

Just as Chateau Montelena and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars propelled Napa Valley to international fame after triumphing over the French entries in the now-famous Paris Tasting of 1976, this contest had a similar effect on American bread baking.

Still, it is the breads themselves, not the awards, that remind us why these simple, exquisitely comforting handmade foods - so recently rescued from obscurity - have sustained us for millennia.

### Loaf Dictionary

**Baguette:** Long, narrow, yeasted French bread loaf with a crisp crust and slightly chewy interior punctuated by many air holes. Made in sourdough or sweet versions (as in not sour), sometimes studded with a mixture of seeds; it's best eaten the day it's baked. In France, the dimension and weight are strictly defined by law, but here the term is more loosely applied. Baguettes go well with pâtés and other appetizers and make excellent crostini (sliced thin, toasted and topped with olive oil or savory spreads such as cheese).

**Bâtarde:** Similar to a baguette, but with a larger circumference and lower percentage of crust versus interior.

**Campagne:** Usually made with a mix of wheat and rye flours, giving it more body and somewhat more intense flavor - often a nutty quality. The crust is firm and chewy, but the interior is still notably tender. This bread adds character to sandwiches.

**Ciabatta:** A wide, rather flat, yeasted Italian loaf so named because its shape supposedly resembles a slipper (ciabatta in Italian). It has a thin crust, dusted with flour, and a tender texture with a large number of holes. This bread is also great with hors d'oeuvres, including marinated vegetables such as peppers. Because of the holes, it's not ideal for sandwiches.

**Focaccia:** A relative of pizza, this flat Italian yeast bread usually incorporates olive oil, with more oil drizzled over its dimpled top. The bread is often topped with rosemary or other herbs, or sun-dried tomatoes. Focaccia is a favorite for Mediterranean-style sandwiches.

**Levain:** Made with natural fermentation, utilizing wild rather than commercial yeasts, pain au levain (its full name) is shaped in round or oval loaves and possesses a rustic character - large, uneven holes and assertive grain flavor (partly due to small amounts of whole wheat or rye flours). This bread is tangy because of a longer fermentation with a natural sourdough starter. The crust is typically golden with a springy texture.

**Pugliese:** Often incorporating olive oil, this rustic Italian loaf is similar to ciabatta with large holes and distinct grain flavor. - CK

### Savory Olive Oil Challah

Adapted from a recipe by Maggie Glezer

- 2 teaspoons or one packet instant yeast
- 8 cups unbleached bread flour
- 2 1/2 cups warm water
- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon table salt
- Sesame seeds for sprinkling

In a large bowl, whisk together the yeast and 2 1/2 cups flour, then whisk in the water until the yeast slurry is smooth. Ferment for 10-20 minutes, until it starts to puff up. Whisk in the oil and salt. When the mixture is smooth, stir in the remaining flour with your hands or a wooden spoon. When the mixture forms a shaggy ball, scrape it out onto your work surface and knead it until it is fairly smooth and soft.

Place dough in a clean, warm bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Ferment until it triples in bulk, about 2-3 hours.

Cover two baking sheets with parchment paper or oiled foil. Divide the dough into two large loaves and braid or shape them as desired. Position them on the sheets, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 8 and

up to 24 hours.

When ready to bake, remove the loaves from the refrigerator and let them proof until tripled in size, about 2 1/2 hours. Thirty minutes before baking, preheat oven to 425 degrees and arrange the racks in the lower third and upper third positions. When the loaves remain indented when pressed with your finger, brush them with water and sprinkle heavily with sesame seeds. Bake for about 20 minutes, then switch the breads from top to bottom and front to back and bake for another 20 minutes. When the loaves are very darkly browned, remove from oven and let cool on a rack.

Makes 2 loaves

The recipes that follow are the author's:

### Bruschetta with Tomatoes, Arugula and Black Olives

- 4 slices pugliese or white country bread, cut 1/2" thick, halved
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup peeled, seeded, diced ripe tomatoes
- 1/4 cup tightly packed, torn arugula leaves
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 8 small black olives in brine, pitted

Preheat an outdoor grill or preheat the broiler. Grill or broil the bread slices on both sides. Place on a baking sheet. While they are still warm, drizzle one side with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Combine tomatoes, arugula and garlic in a bowl. Mix well. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Top bread slices with tomato mixture and garnish with olives.

Serves 4

### Panzanella (Bread Salad)

- 1/3 cup red wine vinegar
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 8 slices (each 1/2" thick) pugliese or country bread, several days old
- 8 cups (about) cold water
- 2 pounds ripe plum tomatoes, coarsely chopped (about 5 cups)
- 1 red onion, cut lengthwise in half, then crosswise into paper-thin slices
- 1 cup loosely packed, fresh basil leaves, torn into bite-size pieces

Pour vinegar into small bowl. Gradually whisk in oil. Season vinaigrette to taste with salt and pepper.

Place bread in large bowl. Pour in enough cold water to cover bread. Soak 5 minutes. Drain well; gently squeeze handfuls of bread to remove as much liquid as possible.

Coarsely crumble bread into same bowl. Add tomatoes, onion and basil. Toss with enough vinaigrette to coat. Season generously with salt and pepper and toss again. Refrigerate the panzanella for at least 1 hour or up to 4 before serving.

Serves 6

### Pappa al Pomodoro (Bread and Tomato Soup)

- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1 red onion, chopped
- 3 large garlic cloves, minced
- Pinch of dried hot pepper flakes
- 1 pound very ripe tomatoes, fresh or canned
- 1 pound pugliese or white country bread, several days old
- 4 cups chicken broth, either homemade or low-sodium canned
- 1 cup fresh basil, cut into julienne strips
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat 1/4 cup of olive oil in a stockpot over medium heat. Add onion, garlic and pepper flakes and sauté until onion is tender, about 5 minutes.

Cut tomatoes into large chunks and add to the stockpot and simmer for 15 minutes.

Cut bread into small pieces and add to the pot, along with the broth and basil.

Season with salt and pepper to taste and simmer for 15 minutes longer. Remove from the heat, cover, and let rest for 1 to 2 hours.

When ready to serve, stir very well and place in individual soup bowls. Drizzle 1 tablespoon olive oil on each serving. It may be eaten hot, lukewarm or cold.

Serves 4

### Savory Bread Pudding with Mushrooms, Cheese & Herbs

- 1 1-pound loaf focaccia or baguette, cut into 1 1/2" pieces
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 pounds assorted wild mushrooms, sliced
- 6 large eggs
- 2 cups half-and-half
- 2 teaspoons salt

- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups grated Gruyère cheese
- 1 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 1/3 cup chopped fresh chives
- 1/3 cup chopped fresh parsley

Place bread on 2 large baking sheets. Let stand uncovered overnight to dry out.

Melt butter in a large sauté pan and saute mushrooms slowly until browned, about 5 minutes. Set aside.

Whisk eggs, half-and-half, salt, and pepper together in a bowl.

Mix cheeses and herbs together in a bowl.

Place half of bread in a 13"x 9"x 2" glass baking dish. Sprinkle with half the mushrooms, then half the cheese mixture and half the egg mixture. Repeat with remaining bread, mushrooms, cheese mixture and egg mixture. Let stand 20 minutes, pressing with a spatula to submerge bread pieces.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Bake bread pudding until brown and puffed, about 45 minutes. Cool 10 minutes before serving.

Serves 6

### Chocolate Bread Pudding

- 1/2 loaf challah, crust trimmed and cut into 1 1/2" slices; then cut into 1/2" cubes
- 1/2 pound bittersweet chocolate, chopped
- 2 1/2 cups half-and-half
- 4 large egg yolks
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoons vanilla
- Pinch salt
- Whipped cream for garnish

Divide bread among eight 3/4 cup custard cups. Bring half-and-half to simmer in heavy saucepan over medium heat. Remove saucepan from heat. Add chocolate and stir until melted and smooth. Whisk in yolks, sugar, vanilla and salt. Blend well. Pour mixture into custard cups. Press down on bread cubes with back of spoon to saturate bread completely. Let stand for an hour or until bread is soaked through.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Cover custard cups loosely with foil. Place in oven and bake until puddings are set and knife inserted in the center comes out with some moist custard clinging to the blade, about 30 minutes.

Cool 20 minutes before serving. Garnish with a dollop of whipped cream.

Serves 8

*Food Editor Carole Kotkin is a Miami-based cooking instructor and consultant who co-authored Mmmiami - Tempting Tropical Tastes for Home Cooks Everywhere.*

[home](#) • [cover story](#) • [commentary](#) • [feature](#) • [buyline](#)  
[complimentary taste](#) • [past issues](#) • [writers](#) • [subscribe](#)

---

The Wine News  
P.O. Box 14-2096  
Coral Gables, FL 33114  
Telephone: 305.740.7170  
Fax: 305.740.7153