

On Bread Alone

By Joey Porcelli

Can man live on bread alone? Maybe, if it 's baked by some of Colorado's finest bakeries. Our local bakers offer an endless variety of taste tempting loaves to accompany a meal or eat alone, just as a treat. There's even "bread for all seasons." Denver Bread Company bakes Irish soda bread once a year in honor of St. Patrick's Day. Great Harvest makes "honey bunnies" for Easter and Il Fornaio offers their special Italian panetone, a sweet egg bread filled with candied fruit, during the Christmas season.

Recipes at Colorado bakeries date back to ancient artisans as well as family secrets passed down generation to generation. Regardless of the source, the basic ingredients remain the same; flour, salt, water, sugar and yeast. So what makes some breads so delicious? Some say it's kneading by hand, others credit the quality of stone milled flour or the temperature of the oven. Robert Lederman of Bluepoint Bakery says the secret to good bread is "an awful lot of love and TLC."

BLUEPOINT BAKERY

Formerly Pour la France, Bluepoint Bakery, located in north Denver, is a wholesale operation. Opened in 1990 by Fred Bramhall and Mary Clark, a husband and wife catering/baking team, Bluepoint now services 600 customers including coffee shops, restaurants, hospitals and espresso bars. Bluepoint's signature item is a sourdough made from Colorado grapes. "Fermenting almost 10 years now, the mother dough is totally naturally," says Lederman, Bluepoint's Operations Manager/Partner.

Lederman, who moved to Denver from the East Coast, is a third generation baker who supervises the Bluepoint operation. His bakery uses three, double rack, revolving, convection-style ovens that hold 20-40 pans at a time. Because "bread is to be eaten fresh," Bluepoint uses all natural ingredients with no artificial preservatives or chemicals. All breads are made from 100% scratch. Lederman says, "We make about 25,000 pounds of bread dough each week. Our bread is made the old fashioned way, hand done, and hand finished. We train bakers to have a skill and make a humbling product. Baking is still a very humbling profession because bread is still the staff of life."

PANERA

Josh Rains, manager of Panera Bakery at 1350 Grant St. would probably agree. His franchise bakery donates bread to neighborhood food kitchens as part of a charity called Operation Dough Nation. Panera's philosophy is that the universal spirit of bread is sharing. At the end of the day, Panera donates all unsold bread to local hunger relief groups.

Panera, translated into "a time of bread" in Latin and "House of Bread" in Spanish, was founded in St. Louis by Ken Rosenthal. Rosenthal learned the secret of sourdough in the San Francisco Bay area and brought it back to the Midwest to open the St. Louis Bread Company. As he expanded, he changed the company's name to Panera. Known nationally for its sourdough, Panera bakers take three days to prepare this signature item. Rains says, "No one around can touch us with our sourdough. The secret is in our 27-year-old base." Panera's sourdough was judged "Best in the Bay Area Sourdough Recipes category at the San Francisco Fair and Exposition three years in a row.

Baked daily, Panera bread is a treat for customers who walk over from the Colorado State Capitol, the corner bookstore or the art school nearby. They can choose from more than a dozen breads including French, focaccia, tomato basil, olive sourdough, rye with caraway seeds and asiago cheese. As a service to the health conscious customer, Panera's menu lists the number of calories and amount of sodium in each bread.

GREAT HARVEST

A concern for customer health is shared by another of Denver's fine bakeries, Great Harvest at 765 S. Colorado Blvd in the Belcaro Center. Co-owner Barry Sparks explains that the only way his company maintains their priority of freshness is to grind their own flour daily. Using a stone grinding mill patented in the 1800s, Great Harvest starts each morning with a four-hour grinding process. Although the mill is now run by electric motors, the basic technology has been around for centuries. Sparks says, "In the bread making we do, one half of our flour is ground the day we make the bread, the other half is no more than two days old."

Great Harvest owners Barry and Kate Sparks and Jay and Mary Sparks started this family business fifteen years ago. The original Great Harvest bakery opened in Great Falls, Montana and later expanded to Colorado. "My parents were exposed to the Great Harvest in Boulder and my mom drove 40 miles to buy a loaf of bread," says Sparks. "We became hooked on the product."

Great Harvest offers seven different varieties along with their flagship bread, honey whole wheat. They also bake a specialty "bread of the month." Sparks says "What sets us apart is that we start from scratch, grind our own wheat, hand knead to shape the loaves and bake in the mornings. Our bread weighs twice as much compared to store breads. That's a special treat for some customers. After all, we're only as good as our last loaf of bread."

IL FORNAIO

At Il Fornaio, baking bread is a time-honored tradition. Created in response to the disappearance of artisan baking, Il Fornaio started in 1972 as a baking school in a small village outside of Milan. In 1981, the company came to the United States where it adapted its methods and recipes to American flours and, in the case of Denver, altitude. A combination bakery/restaurant, Il Fornaio has three Denver stores; one in LoDo, one at the Denver Tech Center and one at Flat Irons Crossing. Because of the demand for their bread, Il Fornaio is branching out to build a classic bakery on Havana St., complete with an oven imported from Italy. Anne Goldberg, Vice President of Bakeries says, "The core of our products are the original Italian recipes. We bake on a stone hearth so we need the right equipment and ovens to make it happen."

Il Fornaio's delectable assortment of breads is so diverse, they printed a "book of breads" to list them. There's noci, a whole-wheat walnut; pagnotta, a rustic peasant loaf; panmarino, flecked with fresh rosemary and their signature ciabatta bread. Ciabatta or "slipper bread" is the bakery's best seller with 800,000 loaves sold each year. With its crunchy crust, this bread is light and porous inside. Goldberg says, "I can't think of a better bread to use when you're sopping up pasta sauce."

Thanks to the talents of Jan Schat, Head Baker and General Manager/Partner, Il Fornaio's reputation for bread is world-renowned. Schat, along with his fellow Baking Team USA members, lead the U.S. to victory in the Coupe du Monde de la Boulangerie (World Cup) of Baking in 1999.

DENVER BREAD COMPANY

Denver Bread Company, a beloved corner bakery on 32nd and Irving streets, bakes bread every day with pride and a personal touch. Owner Greg Bortz is the personification of an individual entrepreneur who truly cares about his product and his customers. When neighbors in the Highlands area walk into Bortz's bakery, they smell the aroma of fresh baked bread and scones. Rows of fresh boules line racks behind the front counter. On the floor are stacked bags of Sir Lancelot Hi-Gluten flour, "never bleached, never bromated." Bortz's crew, on shift since

3:00 a.m., hand punches dough in fermentation buckets to continue their 3 1/2-day sourdough process. They slash creative designs into breads, soon to go into the oven. Bortz says, "Our baking is an art. If we can't make it really high quality, I don't want to make it."

Customers from as far away as Cheyenne and Salt Lake City come to Denver Bread Company for baked goods. Clients include 21 restaurants as well as the local cheese shop and coffee bar. Walk-in customers support the bakery, shopping the European way of buying fresh bread daily. Bortz describes his signature item, a three-pound boule as having "great structure; moist with a chewy crust." Other Denver Bread Company favorites are Bavarian, whole wheat, buttermilk, and Italian. Breads flavored with rosemary and saffron or topped with goat cheese, sun dried tomatoes or portabello mushrooms often become a meal in themselves.

Originally from Ithaca, New York, Bortz learned his craft in the San Francisco Bay area and after working in Italy for a year. A pastry and bread chef at Mel's in Cherry Creek, he decided to open his own bakery five years ago. Dedicated to maintaining high standards, Bortz isn't eager to expand. His bakery keeps him plenty busy. "It's hard to make a nice bread. On a perfect day, it's still difficult with so many variables. I'm blessed with really talented people who persevere. We don't use machines here. Instead, we bake with lots of pride. Our bread speaks for itself."

BOULDER BREAD COMPANY

Bread that speaks for itself is also found in Boulder at the Gerk family's Boulder Bread Company, 1727 Pearl St. Founded in 1896, Boulder Bread Company, has a rich heritage. Previously part of the Boulder Community Hospital, a research center for tuberculosis, this bakery was opened to feed patients. When it became cheaper for the hospital to contract out for baked goods, the decision was made to sell the bakery to the highest bidder. Stan and Rhodene Gerk won the bid and moved the bakery to Pearl St. The original bakers came along and taught Stan how to mix dough and handle operations. Early customers included "mom and pop" stores as well as former hospital patients.

Duane Gerk, President and Manager, grew up in the bakery business. He says, "Years ago, it was a lot more fun, not quite so cut throat. We had friends helping friends. Now we have to keep the bread turning over in the stores." Gerk, who works 60-70 hours each work, credits Boulder Bread Company's repeat customers with keeping him going. "They call up and tell us our bread is so good."

Boulder Bread Company bakes four times a week, making 1,000 - 1,200 loaves each day. With nine varieties to choose from, best sellers are 100% whole wheat, sunflower oatmeal, ten-grain and white. Gerk says, "Every once in a while Dad makes a surprise bread like potato onion dill. Our bread tastes more like homemade because it's cut and kneaded by hand and we use wholesome and natural ingredients." Recipes from the early days have been adjusted for Boulder's healthy lifestyle. Gerk explains that old time bakers used corn sugar and vegetable shortening. "We had to switch over when people became health conscious. Now we use soy oil and lecithin to replace the shortening and instead of corn sugar, we use sweeteners like honey and molasses."