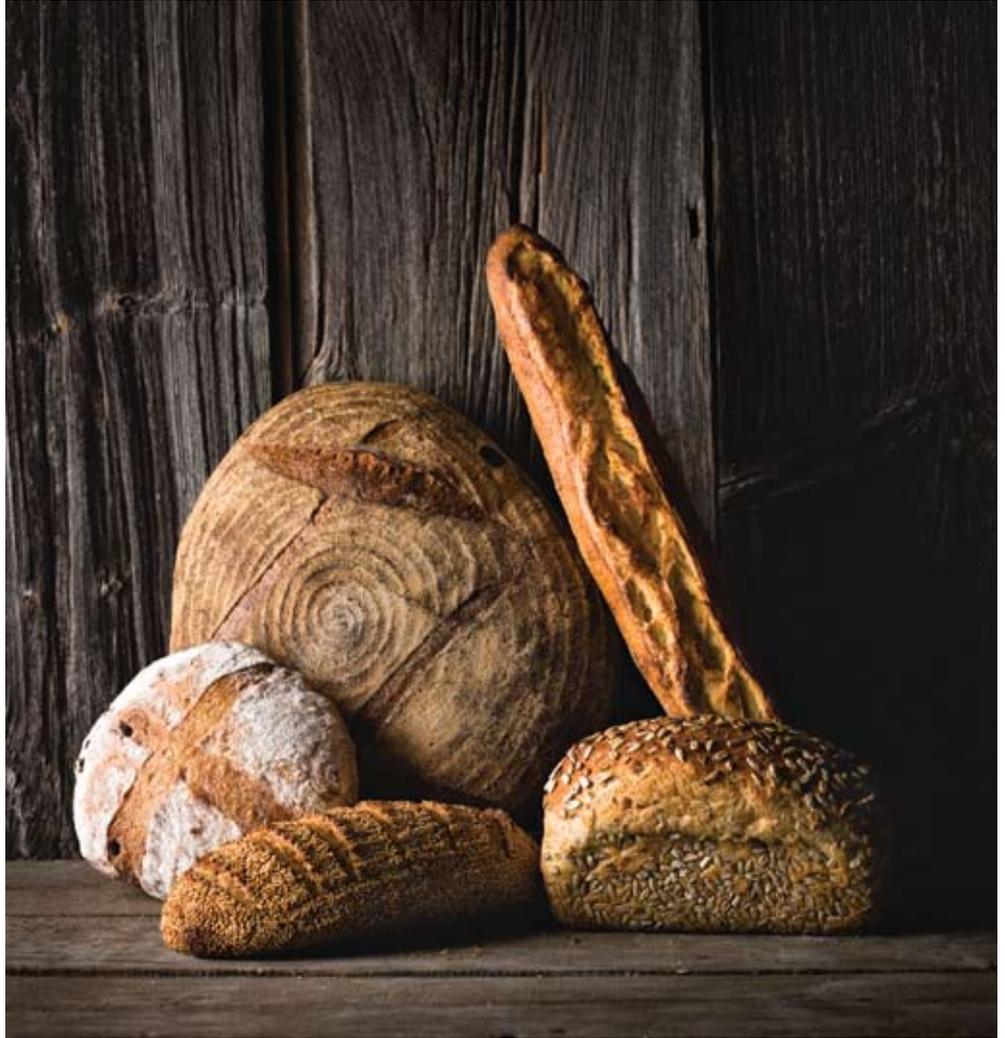


As better bread sweeps the capital and competition heats up among the city's artisanal bakeries, **Shawna Wagman** asks what our loaves say about us

"[Freshly baked bread] will smell better, and taste better, than you remembered anything could possibly taste or smell, and it will make you feel, for a time at least, newborn into a better world than this one often seems."

M.F.K. Fisher,
The Art of Eating



The Rise of Good Bread

I STILL REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I tasted Art-Is-In bread. It was an auspicious occasion — one of the first outings I took with my then newborn daughter. Deliriously sleep deprived on that summer morning, I wandered among the stalls of the Ottawa Farmers' Market and stopped to pick up a sample of a multi-grain baguette. This was no ordinary bread! The complexity of its flavour swirled around my palate and lingered like a wonderful raw-milk cheese. In that moment, I

Loafing around: (clockwise from top) kamut sourdough baguette (True Loaf), buttermilk multi-grain (Art-Is-In), spelt sourdough multi-grain (True Loaf), miche au raisins (Oh! Petits plats français), sourdough miche (True Loaf)

was struck by the sensation of having tasted something unique and mysterious, yet, at the same time, totally familiar. Looking back on it three years later, I realize that this was the beginning of a personal journey to discover what makes good bread. It also coincided with a new movement stirring in the city's food circles: the emergence of a bona fide bread scene complete with passionate characters and a pinch of intrigue.

Soon after, I contacted Art-Is-In owner Kevin Mathieson and set up a meeting at the kitchen he was renting at the back of the defunct Café Henry Burger. As he came off an all-night shift, the dark circles beneath Mathieson's eyes were the only evidence of his

fatigue. My weary postpartum brain struggled to keep up with his animated explanation of the two-day-long baking process: the feeding of the sourdough starter, the constant attention and gentle folding of the dough, the cutting and shaping of it by hand, and the proper amount of steam in the oven. “Very slow fermentation is what builds the acidity in the dough and creates the nutty, buttery, earthy flavours,” the baker explained. “The steam is like lotion on the skin and allows bread to rise higher because it rises so slowly.” That steam also makes the outside of the bread crunchy and gives it a nice dark caramel colour. Part chemistry, part history, part philosophy — this was a crash course in artisanal baking.

BEFORE THE NAME ART-IS-IN began tripping off local connoisseurs’ tongues, it was very difficult to find good bread in this city. “It was pretty much a desert,” admits Jacques Pascal, vice-president of sales for Première Moisson in Vaudreuil-Dorion. Five years ago Quebec’s leading artisanal bakery decided to expand into Ontario and came sniffing around Ottawa to assess the region’s bread offerings. They discovered that just one traditional bakery existed in Gatineau — the quintessential *boulangerie française*, Philouze. Hard to believe that just a few short years later, we can walk into almost any supermarket or specialty food shop and find handsome displays of “old-fashioned” and “artisanal” breads — many of them “baked fresh

in-house.” Sales of artisan-style bread in supermarkets have been growing faster than any other part of the bread business, Pascal says. Today Première Moisson ships approximately 40,000 loaves each week to the Ottawa area.

Christian Nadon, a Gatineau-based caterer, is hoping to capitalize on this trend and cash in on the burgeoning niche. Last summer he discovered that a massive baking facility was available in an industrial park off Innes Road. The building, abandoned a few years earlier by Hospital Food Services, still had its huge bread ovens, massive storage and freezers, and loading dock for delivery trucks. Nadon contacted Sébastien Hervé, who had left months earlier to work at Art-Is-In Bakery, and offered to make him head baker in his new venture. The result is a line of wholesale sourdoughs and ciabatta in flavours such as thyme and caramelized onion, olive, and sun-dried tomato and roasted garlic. Like Art-Is-In breads, the loaves being produced by Oh! petits plats français (sometimes called Oh! Bread or Signature Breads) are made by hand, using traditional techniques. While not all of the ingredients and flavour combinations are identical, the breads could be considered Art-Is-In knock-offs.

Some might call it a shifty move, but Nadon is completely candid about his intentions. “I like to make money,” he says simply. As a businessman, he couldn’t resist this opportunity. “There was no competition for [Mathieson’s] breads in the region, which is one of the

reasons for his success,” he explains. And while Nadon flatly denies rumours that have been swirling around the city that his baker stole Mathieson’s recipes, he doesn’t apologize for their uncanny likeness either. “There’s nothing new in bread in the last thousand years,” he says. “There’s enough business to go around for both of us.”

At some level, the whole concept of mass-produced artisanal loaves contradicts itself. It is arguable whether anything made on a factory-large scale can be considered truly artisanal. But where do we draw the line? And for what purpose? What I can argue is that the widespread availability of better bread, in all its forms, means there has never been a better time to make a sandwich in Ottawa. As appreciation for good bread grows, we are starting to see the arrival of fresh talents who are, in turn, heating up the competition among the small-scale artisanal bakeries already here. In the same way that the city can now boast a number of lively farmers’ markets and a hearty buy-local movement, artisanal bread is finding its place and infusing great new flavour into the city’s food scene.

WHEN YOAV D’VAJA, A PHYSICIST with a love of cooking, moved to Ottawa seven years ago, he knew he wanted to work with food. He found a job at the Wild Oat and began learning about traditional bread-making techniques from books and experiments in his own kitchen. The more he learned, the more disturbed he

was with what was being produced at other local bakeries. He discovered food colouring in rye bread, vinegar added to so-called sourdoughs, and chemical conditioners used to prolong the shelf life of bread. “These days people don’t treat food with enough respect,” says D’Vaja. “We eat without thinking about what we’re putting in our bodies.”

In 2005, the opportunity presented itself for D’Vaja and his wife, Keren, to take over an existing Japanese-run

Over the past three years, Bread & Sons has built up a dedicated following. Business has doubled each year, and the number of employees has grown from two to 15. Meanwhile, D’Vaja’s own family has expanded to include — somewhat ironically — two daughters. (The bakery’s name comes from the idea that bread is the primary product and all the other items — from pastries to quiches to cookies — are the relatives, or the sons.)

great bread — and great food in general. Let’s call it love. “I can’t explain it, but it’s there,” he says. “Perhaps it’s because when you have the intention of baking good food, you pay more attention.” From my perspective, anyone who is willing to work through the night at such physically and mentally demanding work must consider it a labour of love. Unlike the bread that can be made in a couple of hours with flour and water and a packet of instant

He pops the lid off a plastic container and lets me inhale the light, earthy, almost fruity scent of the bakery’s sourdough starter. Before closing it, he puts his own nose over the top and takes a deep breath. “I’m addicted to it,” Yoav D’Vaja says with a grin. “If it’s kept in the fridge, you’d never get a smell like this”

bakery on Bank Street. Bread & Sons was born. Their organic breads and baguettes contain top-notch ingredients, many of them locally grown. When I stop by the shop just as the lunchtime rush is winding down, funky music fills the large open kitchen that is fully on display for its customers. “It can be stressful. It’s a lot of pressure on everyone,” says D’Vaja. “But there’s an energy you get from doing retail right in the bakery.” The ability to see bakers at work is akin to the experience of buying produce from the farmer: it helps us make an important connection — one that is too often invisible — between what we eat and where it comes from.

When I sit down with D’Vaja in the basement of the bakery to discuss the secrets to good bread, he immediately pops the lid off a plastic container and lets me inhale the light, earthy, almost fruity scent of the bakery’s sourdough starter. Before closing it, he puts his own nose over the top and takes a deep breath. “I’m addicted to it,” he says with a grin. “If it’s kept in the fridge, you’d never get a smell like this. It would be very sour.”

D’Vaja believes passionately that good bread begins with top-quality, all-natural ingredients. It’s an explanation, he later admits, that fails to account for the intangible elements of any truly

yeast, good bread requires one of the most precious ingredients of all: time.

WHEN PATRICK GRAHAM and Yael Matte opened the doors to True Loaf Bread Company in March, they were expecting to sell perhaps 20 loaves on their first day. But word had already spread about the young couple setting up shop on Gladstone Avenue to bake traditional sourdough loaves and classic French baguettes. “It was mayhem,” says Graham. The first 180 loaves of bread sold out in just a few hours. The next day he baked twice as many — and sold out again. “We weren’t prepared for it,” he says. “We were running around try-

ing to get more ingredients at night. My sister had to deliver flour to us.”

Recent transplants to Ottawa, the couple had spent the past four years in Montreal. With their new baby to care for, Matte encouraged Graham to apprentice at Le Fromentier, one of the city’s finest artisanal bakeries. Ironically, he didn’t even like the bread the first time he tried it. “I thought it was really sour,” he recalls. But after sampling a few more loaves, he became completely enamoured of its complex flavours and textures, and there was no turning back.

Like some of the most revered bakers in France, Graham believes in baking his crusts until they are very dark, ultra-crunchy, and deeply caramelized. As new customers approach the shop’s display racks of enormous bronzed sourdoughs, sesame-studded spelt breads, and dark golden kamut baguettes, their eyes widen. Many people inquire about the flat, crusty fougasse stuffed with olives and sun-dried tomatoes (its fillings change weekly). Matte cheerfully holds it up and explains how its shape makes it ideal for tearing apart to eat on its own — a selling feature that seems to make it irresistible; almost everyone who gets the spiel buys one. “Ottawa customers have been wonderful,” says Matte. “There’s definitely an openness and a keenness to try new things.”

The couple were drawn to Ottawa for several reasons: its proximity to family, the opportunity for a more outdoorsy lifestyle and, finally, a bread market that was wide open. After living in Montreal, a city with a thriving bread culture and top-notch artisanal bakeries on almost every corner, Graham admits that they weren’t sure what to expect of customers in their new home. “We thought there would be more of a learning curve,” says Graham. “We thought we were going to have to educate people here more than we have.”

AS AN OBSERVER of the city’s food scene and a self-confessed bread-ophile, it has been my particular pleasure to watch the city’s bread scene develop. I’ve noticed that since the emergence of artisanal breads, more restaurant chefs are beginning to bake their own breads. Not only are they trying to set themselves apart, but it’s an easy way to send a message to diners that absolutely everything is made from scratch. At the Black

Cat Bistro, for instance, servers make a point of emphasizing that the bread is made in-house. On one visit, I couldn’t help noticing that the multi-grain loaf, sweetened with molasses and spiked with fennel seeds, was a dead ringer for one of Art-Is-In’s baguettes. Mathieson confirmed my suspicions that the restaurant’s pastry chef, Trish Larkin, had been one of his apprentices. But instead of being offended, Mathieson says this type of imitation is flattering.

It will be interesting to see how these new rivalries in the bread scene shake out in the longer term. Is there enough room for everyone? Mathieson has plans to open a permanent retail location with a larger production space for Art-Is-In Bakery, hopefully by the fall. He says he will continue to develop his own recipes, launch new breads, and create new products such as cookies and scones. The bigger operation of Première Moisson, meanwhile, is preparing to set up stand-alone street-corner bakeries in Ottawa in the next two years. Bread & Sons’ owner Yoav D’Vaja is considering opportunities to open new locations, while Patrick Graham and Yael Matte at True Loaf are hoping to secure wholesale contracts to enhance their retail business. As the artisans duke it out for our hearts and bellies, you and I are the big winners.

Since bread is something most of us eat every day, the bread we choose says a lot about us. Perhaps more than anything else we eat, bread ties us to one of the most common human experiences — breaking bread — and thus reflects our values as individuals and as a community. Artisanal bread is beautiful, delicious, and healthful, but it is also only made possible with human touch. By baking or buying or sharing better bread — by taking good bread seriously — we are really saying something about the way we want to live our lives. We are saying that even the most ordinary aspects of life matter to us — and ought to taste damn good. **END**

Art-Is-In, www.art-is-in-bakery.com

Bread & Sons, 195 Bank St., 613-230-5302, www.breadandsons.com

Oh! Petits plats français, 388 boul. Alexandre Taché, Gatineau, 819-778-8771

Philouze, 811, boul. St. René O., Gatineau, 819-561-8062

Première Moisson, www.premieremoisson.com

True Loaf Bread Company, 573 Gladstone Ave., 613-680-4178