

Flour power:
St John's sourdough

Using your loaf

*Man cannot live by bread
alone, but give him some
butter and he'll have a
damn good go... ➤*

Words
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Steve Drake keeps his mother under the floorboards in his tiny chef’s office. Not too hot, not too cold, it’s the ideal place to stash this precious, tangy smelling concoction. His levain has evolved - quite literally - into something very special indeed. At about 4pm each day a portion of the sourdough starter is removed and combined with flour, water and salt to create an awkwardly sticky bread dough. The remainder of the mother is fed with more flour and tucked back underneath the boards, safe from variances in temperature and the bustle of the main kitchen.

At first the dough requires a great deal of attention: regular but brief kneads develop the gluten proteins without overworking. After a few hours, the bread is shaped into long, easy to slice loaves which are proved overnight in the walk-in. A long cold prove amps up flavour, more starch is converted to tastier sugars. The next day, the loaves are baked at 220°C for 40 minutes. The result is nothing short of spectacular, a perfectly charred exterior hides a yielding waxy inner and the flavour is incredible: an intense but well-mannered sourness followed by a heady hit of wheat.

“As a kitchen team it’s a product we’re extremely proud of,” says Drake, chef-patron at Drakes in Ripley, Surrey. “It’s good to have a project and something to look after, our mother has been going for nearly three years now and feeding and caring for it has become part of the kitchen routine. We all feel a sense of responsibility towards it.”

For smaller, high-end venues outside the major cities that want good fresh bread every day, a DIY approach is increasingly the only option available. Rising transport costs have made it prohibitively expensive for good, artisan bakeries to deliver small amounts of bread to restaurants every day. “The price of petrol and labour these days means it’s no longer financially viable for many bakeries to deliver £20 worth of bread day in, day out,” says Dan Lepard, an internationally renowned bread expert and food writer. “This has brought about something of a resurgence in restaurant bread

making - many head chefs and pastry chefs are now baking small amounts of good bread.”

Smaller restaurants that want to make enough bread for the table don’t need costly special equipment. Two or three kilogrammes of dough can be worked by hand so specialist dough mixers aren’t necessarily required and, while combi-ovens give chefs good control of moisture levels, they are by no means essential.

Sourdough domination

Well-hydrated, chewy and slightly sour with a proper crust, sourdough dominates the restaurant table at the top-end. This certainly wasn’t always the case, however. “When I first started baking it was hard to get chefs into sourdough because they were only interested in breads that were very soft,”

says Lepard, pastry chef and baker to some big names in the mid to late ’90s, including Giorgio Locatelli, John Torode and Stephen Terry. “They never tasted it or ripped it open, they’d just squeeze it. I remember being very happy when Pierre Koffmann cracked my bread open like an egg to examine the crust and the inside.

Another reason for sourdough’s lofty status at the restaurant table is its basic functionality. When St John’s Fergus Henderson said “bread is as vital as your knife and fork in the eating process”, he almost certainly had sourdough in mind, and certainly not the pappy nonsense pedalled at the supermarkets. “Sourdough is tough, it’s a good eating implement,” explains Justin Piers Gellatly, head baker and pastry chef for St John’s three restaurants and bakery. “It also keeps well due to

Making dough?

The economic considerations of restaurant bread

It might now be acceptable to charge for bread in Jamie’s Italian or Giraffe, but those that try it in higher-end restaurants will generally be met with resistance. Of course, the cost of giving away bread can be engineered into the menu: adding a nominal amount to main courses makes sense. Flour, yeast, water and salt may be very cheap but bread is a comparatively expensive item to produce when labour, space and fuel costs are taken into account.

With a constant drive to increase consistency and decrease labour costs, baking bread from scratch each and every day in a chain operation is pretty much unthinkable. Some operators buy in frozen raw or par-cooked dough and bake off on site, while other premium chains get bread delivered from a centralised production kitchen or specialist bread wholesaler. For cheaper independents, local bakeries are a good option - take the delivery charge out of the equation and locally baked bread is very cost effective.

“We want to see restaurants seeking out local independent bakeries that make good, additive free bread or adding to the skill set of the people they employ by making their own,” says Chris Young, co-ordinator at The Real Bread Campaign, which fights for additive-free bread baked locally. “Bread should only contain flour, water, salt and yeast, or in the case of sourdough - flour, water and salt. From there, other ingredients are great so long as they are natural: seeds, fruit, bacon - whatever.”

In the casual sector, bread is almost always an incremental sale. Café Rouge charges £2.95 for a basket of baguette and rye bread with butter; Côte charges £1.85 for sourdough baguette and butter and the aforementioned Jamie’s Italian levies a steamy £3.75 for a mixed basket of Italian breads served with olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Weighty margins are achieved and it’s a fairly easy suggestive sale to customers that aren’t keeping a close eye on costs.



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Spreading it around

Butter and other bread accompaniments

Butter is far more expensive per portion than the bread in most cases, especially given its perishability. This partly explains the inexorable rise of olive oil as a partner to bread baskets: it’s cheaper and much less volatile. The peculiar practice of teaming it with cheap balsamic vinegar is nearly as widespread. Cleverly, operators that serve good oil tend to use bottles with a very restricted flow to discourage customers from pouring excessive amounts.

Salted or unsalted, sweet and creamy or sour and lactic, there are a fair few considerations when it comes to choosing butter and a lot of it boils down to personal taste. In terms of popularity, cultured butter just about has the edge on sweet cream butter these days, but sweeter varieties remain an excellent foil for tangy sourdoughs.

Patricia Michleson, owner of La Fromagerie, a cheese company that supplies many restaurants, stocks a wide variety of high-quality butters. She says that chefs should be more adventurous with the butters that they serve, and that unpasteurised, otherwise known as ‘raw’, options are a good place to start. “They have a slightly shorter shelf-life but the taste is second to none – the milk is unheated so it retains its character, they have an incredible flavour.” But it’s worth noting that serving raw milk products is potentially problematic as some diners avoid unpasteurised products for health reasons.

Some chefs are even making their own. Sat



Bains creates a fantastic smoked butter at his Nottingham restaurant and Stephen Harris churns his own at The Sportsman in Seasalter, Kent. Brown butter (taken to the beurre noisette stage, re-emulsified and set) has also become fashionable in recent years. Other more leftfield bread accompaniments include salt cod brandade, anchovy paste and pork rilette.

Graham Garrett, chef-patron at The West House, in Biddenden, Kent, serves his bread with a highly-refined take on dripping that goes down a storm with customers. “We render down pork fat with salt and lots of thyme before blending it with butter. That takes the graininess out. We used to pipe it into little Kilner jars but now we put it through the Pacojet and make nice quenelles out of it. We then put it on a marble slab and top with espelette. It’s very light, but it’s basically just bread and dripping.”

the long prove time - typically the longer the prove the better the shelf-life, and the relatively high water content helps it stay moist.”

Gellatly’s bakery - which operates from underneath a railway arch in Bermondsey, south London - supplies the three St John restaurants, high-end London retail outlets, 50 or so other restaurants and sells directly to the public on Saturday mornings as part of Maltby Street Market. The range includes a small selection of artisan breads plus an assortment of sweet products - including Eccles cakes and donuts - that have inspired a rabid foodie following.

The need for space and time

Baking bread in a restaurant kitchen requires space and time, two commodities that are always in short supply in busy operations. “It’s nice to bake your own bread but only do it if you can get it right. If you’re not going to do it with care and attention just buy in. Chefs come into the kitchen and they have other things to worry about - and there’s rarely enough space in the ovens as they’re always full of roasting bones,” says Gellatly, who caught the bread bug while working as a chef de partie at the inaugural St John in Smithfields, central London.

Despite such challenges, a lot of chefs still bake their own, but there is now less of an emphasis on the specialist restaurant baker, whether employed full-time or brought in on an consultancy basis. “When I was working the London circuit good bakers were in great demand, there was poaching going on and I ended up working for lots of different people,” says Lepard. “This is not so much the case now because property is so expensive, few restaurants can justify the space for specialist deck

ovens and other dedicated baking kit.”

One way to justify a full-on bakery set up is to sell bread as part of a minor retail offering. This is a common model in the US where the restaurant baking scene - particularly in New York and San Francisco - is a little further along. When Fergus Henderson and Trevor Gulliver opened St John in 1994 they brought in Lepard to head up the bakery and, to justify the expense of a large deck oven, bread was sold over the bar. This set-up was the beginning of a fully-fledged retail offering for the now three-strong restaurant group.

As St John demonstrated, baking bread is a great way of sweating your assets - making a little more dough on the side, if you will. When Yotam Ottolenghi launched his first eponymous cafe in Notting Hill, he took the sting out of the lease by making use of the kitchen 24/7: Ottolenghi was a cafe/restaurant by day and evening and a bakery by night. More recently, other London operators have got in on the act including Terence Conran’s



Image: Jason Lowe

Albion Cafe, in Shoreditch, and Quo Vadis, the Soho restaurant now helmed by chef Jeremy Lee.

Moving from rolls to loaves

The notion of trends is largely incompatible with the world of bread. At St John bakery, for example, none of the bread recipes have been changed for years and no new varieties have been added. One notable development however is a shift from individual rolls to loaves. While easier for front of house staff, baking bread in individual portions is more costly and time consuming than loaves.

Another contemporary trend is a move away from flavoured breads. “It’s a customer-driven thing,” explains Lepard. “I hope I can speak for most bakers and pastry chefs when I say that we like our bread plain, but put a bread basket in front of the general public and they’ll go for the sun-dried tomato bread every time. This is happily starting to change though, people are beginning to value purity.”

Though usually far removed in style from the loaves and rolls destined for the restaurant table, very specific breads for sandwich-style dishes have never been a hotter topic as operators clamour to create perfect versions of burgers, hot dogs and bánh mì. Some, including London steak chain Hawksmoor make in house - not for the faint hearted, the logistical challenge of making hundreds of individual rolls and buns - but others develop bespoke recipes with specialist external bakers. Hugh Trung Bui, the operator of specialist bánh mì deli Kêu, worked with Clarke’s, Sally Clarke’s wholesale bakery, to create the very specific kind of rice flour baguette needed for the famed Vietnamese sandwich.

With long rising times and the need to

constantly tend to the levain, sourdough is a big commitment for kitchens. Breads based on faster-acting commercial yeasts are an easier option that can still yield great results. “We do a lot of bread baking in the kitchen, but there are only two of us so we don’t have time to work with levains as much as we’d like to. It’s the long rise time that’s the killer, most recipes need eight hours or so to prove,” says Graham Garrett, chef-patron at The West House, in Biddenden, Kent.

But for purists a levain is the only way to go. Mikael Jonsson - chef-patron at Hedone in Chiswick, west London - is unwilling to get into specifics about his sourdough, considered by many to be the best in the capital. Grudgingly, he explains his three varieties of bread - white and brown sourdough plus a rye-heavy raisin bread used for the cheese course - owe their extraordinary flavour to unusually high hydration levels (the amount of water in the dough) and very long cold proves. “After we add the starter it’s fermented for 22 to 30 hours depending on the mood of the starter. Wet doughs promote complex, secondary flavours in the bread but make it hard to work with,” he says.

The food blogger-turned-chef recently installed a deck oven downstairs and plans eventually to sell loaves to shops and other restaurants. He is even more evasive about the origins of his levain: “Someone told me I shouldn’t talk about it because the health and safety people don’t like it. Let’s just say it’s old. I know a very good baker in Paris that believes being old does not always mean being good, he throws his out every year. It’s probably a myth that it gets better and better with age, but it’s a good story all the same.”
Thanks to Justin Piers Gellatly and the rest of the team at St John Bakery for hosting the shoot.