

# LIVE:

## Our Daily Bread by Alex Vaughan

**Bread. By its definition, it's a very simple-sounding food stuff, made of flour, water and salt, and fermented through the action of yeast. However, there is something in a warm loaf of bread that talks to our senses and awakens feelings of home, family and community.**

I grew up in Portugal, a country where bread is a constant at the table, slathered with a hearty amount of butter or soaked in a warming stew. When I moved to London in 2006, the reality of bread in the British Isles was probably the greatest cultural shock, and one that led me from my love of good bread to an immersive passion for its craft.

### *The UK Bread Landscape*

Over these last ten years, considerable changes have taken place in the UK bread 'landscape'. In 2008 the *Real Bread Campaign* was born, an organization under the umbrella of the charity *Sustain*, co-founded by *Andrew Whitley*. Its aim is to seek, find and share ways to make bread better for us, our communities and the planet.



ALEX VAUGHAN



Recent industry figures show that industrial loaf sales are decreasing whilst the number of artisan bakeries increase, coinciding with a growing demand for sourdough and other bread varieties. The number of keen home bakers also seems to be on the rise, as attested by the number of bread workshops available. Some of these home bakers go on to run micro-bakeries, usually meeting the market's demand at a local level, delivering on foot, by bike or arranging collection points.

### *The Micro-bakers*

Having quite accidentally become a micro-baker myself, I was curious to understand what makes people follow the demanding - and sometimes downright exhausting - path of the craft baker, all from a setup within their homes. I set out to speak to three micro-bakers to try and learn what it is about bread that gets people out of their bed before the cock crows.





### ***John Townshend, Kennington Bakery, London***

John had never actually baked bread until the end of 2013, when he started making his own, and soon found himself caught by the ‘bread bug’. In March 2015 he was setting up, from home, the Kennington Bakery. He approached different local business with the purpose of arranging collection points for direct customers and in this way, a local café became his first wholesale customer. “They immediately ordered one loaf a day, seven days a week. As I wanted to establish the business, I agreed to deliver to them daily.” His bakery took flight and today encompasses direct customers, wholesale and collection points, with John delivering everywhere on his bike. Working 7 days a week, with an ever growing customer base, Townshend started 2016 with a revised plan to develop the business in a more sustainable way.

However, before he’d started to implement this, he found himself with more customers signed up and a quadrupled business. On Fridays and Saturdays, he was spending 4 hours baking for just 3 customers on top of all the other orders. Working 18-20 hours a day, baking and delivering on his bike, he found that, “the skin on my hands started to suffer and my health in general was failing as I was too tired. I ended up buying a new oven so I could meet the demand with less hours of work”.

**JOHN TOWNSHEND**



I was quite intrigued as to what would make someone get up at 1am to work 20 hours’ days and learned that at the core of the Kennington Bakery lies a very strong social conscience. John explains, “If someone tries a slice of my white loaf, compares it to the white loaf from the supermarket and notices the difference in quality and taste, that might lead them to think about the other things they eat too and question them equally, driving them towards a healthier lifestyle”.

Following our conversation, John sent me a small email: “I visited a cafe afterwards to check on feedback, etc. The chap said one of the loaves could just be eaten on its own; this is what I aspire to. Stand-alone bread!”



**Alison McTaggart, *Bread on a Bike*, Cambridge**

Alison McTaggart's greater interest in bread flourished in 2011, fuelled by a *Baking for Community* course run by Andrew Whitley. The making of sourdough bread began to fill all the spare time available around a full time job in nutrition research.

Intrigued by the story of Ben MacKinnon at *E5 Bakehouse*, she contacted him in July 2011 and spent the next 18 months travelling to Hackney every Saturday, gaining loads of experience in all aspects of bread making and running a bakery. In September 2012, she was able to work a month's internship at the *Handmade Bakery* in Slaithwaite, West Yorkshire, the first community supported bakery in the UK. By then Alison knew she would be made redundant from her job at the end of the year. She wasn't thinking of starting a baking business but, as she told me, "My colleagues started asking to try my bread. Up until this moment I was just baking for myself or as presents for friends and family. I started taking bread into work and the bread business just happened naturally. Other friends and contacts heard about it, wanted some and the demand grew and grew."

Fast-forward three years and Alison is still baking from her domestic oven, making up to 95 loaves in

a day, with orders coming from an email list of over 700 people. What began as a learning process has, coupled with people's appreciation and feedback, become a flowing business, and has woven Alison into the fabric of her community. She says, "I had never felt as much a part of this community before. Nowadays people will recognise me and say, "There goes the bread lady!"

The intense work schedule of baking and delivering did take its toll. By the summer of 2015, Alison found herself working over one hundred hours a week. "My body ceased up, forcing me to have a break and look at what I was doing. Giving up on bread was never an option. I had to rethink my schedules and stopped delivering for the time being. I started looking for commercial premises to open a bakery but after a few false starts, I am reconsidering keeping it in the house and further adapting my kitchen to fit the demands of the business."

And what drives Alison forward? "I want to carry on learning about bread and baking for my community. When I am baking, something about the magic of the process takes over. I guess it's a kind of obsession: for each loaf you make there is the opportunity to achieve the perfect loaf, for myself and for my customers."

**ALISON McTAGGART**





**Jane Mason, *Virtuous Bread* and *Bread Angels*,  
London, UK and Monterrey, Mexico**

Jane Mason founded *Virtuous Bread* in 2010, with the goal of effecting positive social change through bread. As Jane explained to me, this was not something she could achieve on her own, so, “setting up a network of like-minded people seemed an excellent way to change the world through bread.”

This line of thought led her to create *Bread Angels*, where people learn how to bake bread but can also train to establish a micro-bakery and enjoy the support of other bakers in the network. She had started out as a micro-baker and I was keen on learning what the greatest challenges she encountered were. Surprisingly, not at all what I had expected! “Keeping up with demand. Working from home, your capacity constraint is your home oven. The truth of the matter is that it’s hard work to set up a business. If you work at home, your office never closes. You have to impose some boundaries to keep being creative, to remember that you love it and to rest.”

Jane’s love for bread comes through strongly in her words. She says, “I like to see how dough has transformed overnight all on its own and how it continues to transform during the final baking



process with only a little help from me. It’s different every day. Every day is a challenge. Some days the bread is beautiful, perfect. Other days, I wonder what on earth happened. Changes in temperature and humidity impact the dough and every time you change the bag of flour, the dough changes.”

Asking her about the UK bread landscape over the last 6 years, Jane mentioned the greater number of artisan bread at farmers’ markets, the development of customers’ taste for new flavours and textures, and a growing interest in connecting with friends over good food. So are micro-bakeries still on the rise? “I believe they are still rising simply because there is such a demand for good bread and there are so many people looking to do something they love to supplement their income. We naturally seek to live our lives with purpose. Baking bread, selling it to happy customers, playing a role in building relationships and communities; these are things that provide many people with a sense of purpose.”

***Bakers dream of bread***

Having chosen the bakers that I spoke to for this article quite by chance, I gradually realised that, coincidence or not, all three share more than a love for bread. They all bring to the table a deep sense of social and community conscience; they seem to be propelled by a need to positively impact and be part of their society. Their pursuit of a perfect loaf brought to mind the film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* and made me realise that we can also dream of bread and use it as the cornerstone for social change. May all our bread be good bread, for ourselves and for our communities.

**JANE MASON**



## Make and bake your own bread with Alex's Basic White Loaf recipe!

*A quick note on bread dough: sticky is good! Refrain from adding more flour and just go with it. As you continue with the kneading, the flour will absorb the water, the gluten will develop and your piece of dough will become tacky and supple.*

### For an 800g loaf:

500g strong/bread white wheat flour  
320g water (room temperature is fine)  
10g fresh yeast or 5g active yeast  
10g salt  
15g good olive oil (optional)

### Method:

- Weigh the flour into a large bowl. If using *active yeast*, make a well in the centre of the flour, add the yeast and cover with 100g of the water. Let it sit for 15 minutes or so to activate the yeast. Add the rest of the water and the other ingredients. If you are using *fresh yeast*, add all of the ingredients straight into the bowl. Mix them together until there is no dry flour and it all comes together in a big lump.
- Knead the dough on a clean surface for 10 to 15 minutes. Try not to add any flour at this stage, because as you knead it, it will all come together.

- The dough will be ready for fermentation when you can gently stretch a small piece of dough between your fingers without it breaking or tearing (known as the window pane test).

- Shape your dough into a ball and put it back into the bowl. Cover with a clean shower cap or some cling film. Leave it in a warm, draft-free place (inside the cold oven is a good option) for about 1 hour.

- Take the dough out of the bowl, shape it into a tight ball and place it on a baking tray lined with baking parchment or greaseproof paper. Cover loosely again with some cling film or a damp cloth, and allow to prove for some 45-60min. The dough will have increased by double its original size when it's ready to bake.

- Whilst the dough proves, preheat your oven to 240°C/475°F/Gas 9. Once the bread dough has fully risen, place the baking tray on the middle shelf of your oven. Bake for 10 minutes at this temperature and then drop the temperature to 200°C/400°F/Gas 6 and bake for another 20 minutes. When the bread is fully baked, a probe should measure 98°C at its core. It should be golden brown and sound hollow when you tap the bottom.

*Allow to cool fully before sharing over a nice meal.*

Alex has been running *The Crow's Rest Bakehouse* from a one bedroom flat in Camberwell, London, since March 2016. Bread is baked to order and delivered by her husband, on a bicycle, on Saturday mornings. She teaches beginner's bread baking workshops from her small kitchen, usually two Sundays a month.

*For more information on the bakeries featured, visit:*

[www.thecrowsrestbakehouse.co.uk](http://www.thecrowsrestbakehouse.co.uk)

[www.kenningtonbakery.co.uk](http://www.kenningtonbakery.co.uk)

[www.breadonabike.wordpress.com](http://www.breadonabike.wordpress.com)

[www.virtuousbread.com](http://www.virtuousbread.com)

[www.breadangels.com](http://www.breadangels.com)

*Images courtesy of the featured bakers.*

