

Crumbs! The secret of bread in restaurants

20 Oct 2007 by Nick Lander/ FT

Let me divulge a restaurant secret that most chefs would rather I did not mention: very few of them bake their own bread.

There are certain chefs in some of the most expensive restaurants who do insist on executing this intensive labour of love but the vast majority now don't. And investigating the commercial arrangements between chefs and the bakers they choose to work revealed a rather more secretive world than I had expected.

It began after a conversation with one baker who supplies London's top hotels and restaurants exclusively with over £750,000 worth of loaves, croissants and rolls a year. He had just had lunch in one of the restaurants he knew his driver had delivered to that morning but out of curiosity he asked the waitress who supplied the restaurant with their bread. She didn't know the answer, went off to the kitchen and returned a couple of minutes later to say how pleased they were that he liked the bread as they baked it themselves!

I had hoped to visit this particular bakery but the initial enthusiasm on the baker's part soon gave way to reticence and my visit was cancelled. But not before I had begun to form a picture of the complex relationship that unites, and often divides, those involved in the seemingly simple world of bread making for restaurants.

The nub of it is the rather difficult, and often dysfunctional, relationship between baker, pastry chef and chef. To prosper restaurants need harmony between the last two but often that is not easy: the much larger brigade of chefs view pastry chefs as essential but prima donnas with an overriding sense of self-importance. In turn, pastry chefs often consider chefs as over-bearing, bordering on 'control freaks' as one curtly put it.

Surprisingly, bakers and pastry chefs don't mix either. One restaurateur who has had first-hand experience of both simply described this relationship as 'invariably like oil and water'. This is perhaps more difficult to comprehend because their essential tools, and often their essential ingredients, are so similar. But pastry chefs, and particularly classically trained French pâtissiers, do tend to think of themselves as the stars of the show and think of bakers as mere journeymen. There is also a significant difference in their sense of involvement. Pastry chefs have to be part of a team while the appeal of a baker's life is that once you are prepared for the anti-social hours the profession demands, your independence is guaranteed.

Yet despite all these challenges there is no doubt that many more chefs would like to bake their own bread than is currently the case at the moment. Chefs who have just opened their own restaurant frequently admit that they are initially buying their bread in but claim that as soon as their business has settled down they intend to bake their own.

This invariably does not happen, however, and as a result over the past decade a number of excellent bakeries have opened around London to supply the capital's restaurants with their daily bread. They include Bagatelle, Clarke's, Exeter Street Bakery, Gail Force, Millers, St John, Paul, and, the most accurately named of them all, Flourpower. While a passion for bread is the common denominator, there are significant differences. Some supply both retail and wholesale, others just supply restaurants and some extend their product range to include cakes, biscuits and chocolates. In certain instances, it would appear, bakers and pastry chefs do mix.

What these companies also have in common is unglamorous surroundings. In contrast to where their bread is served, these bakeries are invariably located in modern, purpose-built industrial units with the best possible access to public transport for their staff and the easiest access into the centre of London for their van drivers. A significant factor in bread making is the ambient temperature between the final point of production and the area in which the bread is loaded into the van. It is therefore crucial that these are as close together as possible. At this juncture excess dampness or excess heat are the enemy.

To discover the other secrets behind baking the best bread for restaurants I set out late one morning for an industrial unit next to an underground line and a busy arterial road that made it as noisy as it was well-located. Even the front door was difficult to spot because of the almost impenetrable, thick plastic flaps that surrounded it in order to maintain a constant temperature.

Once inside, I was handed a white hat and coat by a friendly Frenchman dressed in white from head to toe and told to fill in a Visitors Medical Questionnaire in which I had to declare whether I was carrying typhoid or paratyphoid, or was suffering from skin rashes, boils or discharges. While he talked excitedly on his mobile to a potential new customer, I had the opportunity to look around his storage area that was piled high with the staples, British and French flour, yeast, salt, and tubs of all the ingredients now required for the more fashionable breads such as walnuts, raisins and buttermilk as well as virgin olive oil for Italian ciabatta and focaccia.

As I emerged into the main baking area, I began to appreciate why these artisanal bakeries are now such an integral part of modern restaurant life. Here every morning from 6.00am until 3.00am the following morning when the last driver had returned from delivering to their last customer, 11 bakers are hard at work in an area the size of a soccer pitch and certainly bigger than any kitchen I have seen outside a large hotel or a cruise ship.

The three mixers, respectively 300kg, 200kg and 100kg, looked even more imposing now that they had finished for the day as the Kosovan head baker busily shaped, divided and rolled the loaves on a long mixing table. From there everything passed to a vast machine at the back, probably 20 metres wide and 6 metres high, far bigger than any set of commercial kitchen ovens. This enclosed the essential proofer, which allows the shaped loaves to rise gently before going into the ovens on either side. From there the bread went next door to be packed.

As we walked around, the baker left me in no doubt as to why he was happy to be out of restaurants. "It's war out there between the different chefs," he claimed. But what he was most happy about at the moment was that after six months he had trained someone who had started as a young kitchen porter to become a respectable baker although he feared it would not be too long before he headed back to his native Uzbekistan to open his own bakery.

Bread making may be relatively straightforward but the process of getting the best bread to your restaurant table is anything but.