East End bread

12 Sep 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

I had just sat down to dinner, having cooked a marinated duck breast from Paula Wolfert's ever-reliable *The Cooking of South West France* and my Romanian grandmother's pureed aubergines, when I gleaned a significant insight into the economic impact of a new restaurant from Ed Wilson.

Wilson is the talented chef who, alongside his partner Eric Narioo of wine merchants Les Caves de Pyrène, opened the highly successful **Terroirs** near Trafalgar Square, then **Brawn** in east London followed by **Soif** in Battersea. From 17 September he will descend into the basement kitchen of The Green Man & French Horn, a former pub on St Martin's Lane in the West End, that will specialise in the gentle cooking of the Loire Valley.

Wilson was responding to my question about the source of bread in his restaurants. His policy, he explained, has been to work with local bakers so that his restaurants never become over-reliant on a single supplier. And he positively beamed with pleasure when he related how the opening of Brawn had led to a chance encounter with Ben MacKinnon, then a nascent baker, and to the establishment of his e5 Bakehouse in a railway arch by London Fields railway station. An encounter that has already led to the creation of over 20 new jobs.

The following week I was sitting opposite MacKinnon with a cappuccino and an individual, still warm, Bakewell tart on the table, as his **e5 bakehouse** and café hummed with activity. Our conversation was interrupted only by a call from someone currently working as a highly paid management consultant who was looking for advice as he contemplates a career change to that of a baker.

MacKinnon, 33, is the right man to ask for such advice. Initial training in aquaculture led to a career as a consultant in sustainable energy (think *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*), but MacKinnon now realises that he suffers from a complaint common to many cooks, bakers and coffee baristas. 'I just don't have the ability to sit still', he explained with a smile, looking around as a man drew up outside on a bicycle with three small children perched in the front pannier.

It was watching the men preparing the flat bread at a baker's in Fez, Morocco, that persuaded him that this could be a professional outlet for his energy. This realisation was promptly followed by a week's course at The School of Artisan Food in Nottinghamshire, where he began to appreciate the wonders of sourdough. He started baking, using others' ovens by night and selling at farmers' markets by day, and word began to spread that his bread was good.

He soon learnt two hard facts of commercial life as a baker. The first came from the shopkeepers he approached, who said that if he wanted them to stock his bread, he had to bake seven days a week. And then, when Ed Wilson began his search for a local baker as Brawn's opening approached, he experienced what were to be the very different aspects of working so closely with chefs.

The first was quite what a boon this substantial customer was to be for his bakery. 'The restaurant buys our bread, cuts it correctly and serves it appealingly and then, best of all, doesn't charge their customers for the privilege. This relationship brought our bread to a much wider and more diverse audience than we could ever have hoped for and we got great publicity on the back of the restaurant's success', MacKinnon told me happily.

But chefs can also be hard taskmasters, as MacKinnon soon learnt from his dealings with Oli Barker, Brawn's chef. 'It's a pleasure to deal with him now but we had to struggle through the stage where he was regularly giving me stick whenever the quality varied. But he has always applied just the right amount of pressure for us to improve each month', MacKinnon added.

And with such consistent demand from a busy restaurant came the impetus not just to build their own wood-fired oven in the railway arch, but also to establish their own café, which serves working lunches during the week, brunch on a Saturday and pizza on Sundays.

The café is in keeping with the relaxed atmosphere now prevalent in this thriving part of London. A container in the back courtyard, bought on eBay for £400, holds all the paraphernalia for the takeaway business. Ten bakers and cooks weave in and out of the kitchen, preparing today's lunches and tomorrow's twelve different, wonderfully chewy loaves, of which

my favourite is the Route 66 with its strong rye flavour. And parked outside is the American workcycle that transports kilos of loaves to his restaurant customers Brawn, the Empress in Victoria Park, and the Corner Room, the hotel in the former Bethnal Green Town Hall.

In keeping with his sustainable ethos, MacKinnon will deliver only to customers within cycling distance. But three who trained under him have already moved on to open their own bakeries in Peckham, York and the Isle of Man.

All this because a chef went looking for a baker.

The e5 Bakehouse, Arch 395, Mentmore Terrace, London E8 3PH. Tel 020 8525 2890 www.e5bakehouse.com

Brawn, 49 Columbia Road, E2 7RG, 0207 729 5692 www.brawn.co

The Green Man & French Horn, 54 St Martin's Lane, London WC2N 4EA. Tel 020 7836 2645