Americans no longer have to travel to Europe to experience breads rich in texture and flavor.
Almost 20 years old, I was waiting outside my friend's home in the hills overlooking Avignon, France, the morning sun barely peaking over the roofs. A speeding Renault drove up, then stopped abruptly. Its driver handed me a paper bag with the family's daily bread delivery. The bread was still warm, its crust thick, the bread rich with texture and flavor.

Thanks to the booming artisan bread movement, Americans no longer have to travel to Europe to experience good bread. And good bread is an experience that lingers.

"It's like the difference between Sangria and a good Bordeaux," says Maggie Glezer, author of Artisan Baking Across America (Artisan, 2000). "Now that they know how good bread can be, people are eating it for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

The American artisan bread movement began in California in the early 1980s with the founding of a few pioneer bakeries—Nancy Silverton's La Brea Bakery in Los Angeles and Steve Sullivan's Acme Bread in Berkeley. On the East Coast, a few years later, several bakeries—Amy's Bread in Manhattan, Tom Cat Bakery on Long Island, and
about three years ago, Bay Area artisan baker Grace Baking Company seemed to have grown about as much as it could. It had four thriving retail stores and had saturated the upscale wholesale delivery market within a 100-mile radius; each new account was a little less lucrative and a little too far away. And Founder Glen Mitchell was outgrowing his space, often using the sidewalk out back to cool his breads.

Then, serendipity and a new partner opened up a new universe: a frozen line for supermarkets and specialty food stores. (La Brea Bakery, founded by a pioneering artisan baker, Nancy Silverton, began selling parbaked breads—breads baked 80 percent of the way and then flash frozen—to supermarkets in 1999). Mitchell discovered how good frozen bread could be on his own when a customer began filling up U-Haul trucks with his bread to freeze and resell in an Italian deli several hours away. Mitchell went to investigate. His top-selling Pugliese bread tasted great, even better than the loaves he sold in his own shops.

Grace is a top player in the quickly growing artisan bread supermarket niche, running a distant third to Ecce Panis and La Brea, both recently acquired by major corporations.

This new market for artisan bread is a trend that is changing the way many Americans buy their bread. For supermarkets, facing a shortage of skilled labor and limited space for food preparation, the parbaked lines allow them to give customers fresh, high-quality bread.

"The key to the whole venture is that it's great bread at the beginning, so it's great once they rebake it," says Mitchell.

Today Grace Bread is sold in 15 states and Mexico. Frozen product represents 45 percent of its business with about $7 million in sales, says Grace CEO Fred Doar. Wholesale delivery accounts for an additional 45 percent of Grace's business; retail is about 10 percent. To focus on the frozen line, Grace shut two retail units, scaled delivery routes back from 22 to 18, and moved into a new, larger production site.

Mitchell ferments the breads for 48 hours, bakes them completely, then freezes the loaves. He ships them common carrier to supermarkets, which then rebake the bread for 15 to 18 minutes. Grace's top seller, Pugliese, is a deeply flavored country bread with lots of bubble and a thick crust. The bread lasts for several days; reheating it in the oven restores the crust. Other top sellers include a rustic baguette and sour-dough walnut. "We worked hard to make this the best bread available anywhere," says Doar.

Ecce Panis recently decided to focus almost entirely on its parbaked line, after experiencing 100 percent growth in supermarket sales in the past year. Plans include closing the two remaining Ecce Panis retail stores in Manhattan and opening a second, larger plant. Ecce Panis bread is sold in more than 2,500 supermarkets in 30 states and the company is now owned by Silver Brands, which sold Pace Picante sauce for record profits. "It's growing so fast it's scary," says Ecce Panis CEO J. Russell Chapman.

Ecce Panis ships its breads frozen solid in 53-foot tractor trailers to a supermarket chain's central warehouse, then the supermarket ships the bread, still completely frozen, to individual stores, along with ice cream and other frozen food. Top sellers like seeded semolina and roasted Italian garlic bread retail for about $2.69, about 50 percent more than a loaf of mass-produced sliced bread.

Smaller bakeries, like Zingerman's Bakehouse in Ann Arbor, Mich., are positioning themselves to retain their customers. "Parbaked bread will definitely affect our sales," says Amy Emberling, co-owner of Zingerman's Bakehouse. "We're going to start some direct marketing, explaining the differences in the parbaked bread and ours, which is baked fresh daily."
Artisan bread will follow the path of gourmet coffee. Clear Flour in Boston—developed strong followings. In middle America, Thorn Leonard’s WheatFields Bakery/Café was a founding artisan bakery.

These bakeries differed significantly in technique and focus from traditional ethnic bakeries, which used bleached, bromated flour, higher mixing speeds and slower fermentation times, creating bread with uniform texture, more additives and less flavor. By the mid-1990s, the movement had gained momentum with an artisan bread presence in most regions.

“There was a groundswell of customers who appreciated really good bread,” says Amy Scherber, owner of Amy’s Bread, who created her popular semolina with golden raisin and fennel to satisfy demanding Manhattan bread buyers.

Artisan Bread Defined
Ask ten bakers what their definition of artisan bread is and you will get ten different answers. New equipment innovations now allow for the mass production of high-quality bread, including “artisan-style” breads. But many artisan bakers still insist that real artisan bread requires an element of handwork, forming or cutting the bread. Still, large or small, an artisan baker requires three essential ingredients: attention to high-quality natural ingredients; mindfulness in the process of making bread; and passion.

Applying techniques long used in Europe, artisan bakers nurture the dough with slower mixing times, creating a less uniform texture, and enhance the flour’s natural flavor through long fermentation times. They generally use natural starters. At La Panzanella in Seattle, baker Ciro Pasciuto ferments his Italian peasant bread for 26 hours. At Grace Baking in Albany, Calif., baker Glenn Mitchell ferments his breads for up to 48 hours. The bread is usually well-hydrated, creating a bread with lots of holes, and then baked in a hearth-oven, which forms a thick crust.

“Now that people have learned what bread can be, the market is getting bigger. This movement has raised the overall quality of bread tremendously,” says Peter Franklin, chairman of the board of the Bread Bakers Guild of America. Franklin is now acting as a consultant for startup artisan bakeries in Savannah, Dallas, Miami, and Salt Lake City.

The growth of artisan bread has been built on educating customers until they feel comfortable and understand why the bread looks, feels and tastes the way it does. Getting it into their mouths is almost a mantra in the field.
For instance, when Zingerman's Bakehouse opened in Ann Arbor, Mich., ten years ago, they were the only artisan baker in southeast Michigan. Customers had had little experience with crusty bread. Zingerman's plan: Train the staff about why this bread was different and better, then use every opportunity to teach customers. Named “real bread,” Zingerman’s loaves are sold in brown bags covered with information, including “6 reasons why we like to eat our own bread.” Regular items about the bread were included in the Zingerman’s monthly newsletters; staff even conducted bread baking classes and gave tours of the bakery.

“There was a learning curve. We had some very unhappy customers at first. People said the crust hurt their mouths,” says Amy Emberling, who founded Zingerman’s Bakehouse with partner Frank Carollo. “Zingerman’s has a history of selling products that nobody needs to buy, nobody’s heard about, and nobody cares about.

“We were relentless and over time we got out our message. This is good bread. We are doing terrifically now. Customers love our bread.”

**Baskets of Bland Bread**

One artificial roof to the popularity of artisan bread was the belief that bread was high in fat. Americans had become accustomed to devouring baskets full of bland bread before their meal. Artisan bread is generally low in fat or non-fat and more healthful, lacking the preservatives and sugar and salt added to the dough of breads with shorter fermentation times. It’s what you put on the bread that adds the fat.

Americans are changing their bread-eating habits, eating bread as an accompaniment to the meal. “With good bread it’s not the amount; it’s not stuffing. It’s an experience. Honest bread enhances the flavor of the food,” says Fasciuto.

Ten years ago, Americans wanted flavored breads, breads with nuts, sun-dried tomatoes, olives, chocolate, what some bakers call breads with “everything in them but the kitchen sink.” Customers
PAIN AU LEVAIN: Sometimes called country or farm bread, these breads feature natural starters, water and flour. They are less sour than the San Francisco sourdough with a chewy, honeycombed texture.

ITALIAN PEASANT OR PAESANO BREAD: This white bread originates from the Italian countryside. Made with a small amount of sour starter, it features large holes and has a thinner, chewy crust.

CIABATTA: A free-form loaf, originating from Italy around Lake Como in the North. It features large holes and a chewy crust. It is supposed to resemble a slipper.

PUGLIESE: This white bread, originating from the Puglia region of Italy, has a bubbly interior with a delicate, soft and chewy crust. Grace Baking’s Pugliese is the number-one selling artisan bread in the Bay Area.

SEMOLINA: This bread features a durum wheat that is more coarsely ground, giving the bread a golden flavor and nutty taste. It is often rolled in unhulled sesame seeds for added texture and flavor.

BAGUETTE: The traditional French cylindrical bread, about two feet long, with a thinner crust than most artisan breads and a soft interior.

SAN FRANCISCO SOURDOUGH: This free-form loaf is baked using only natural starters and an extremely long fermentation time, creating a sour, tangy taste. The bread has lots of holes, and a chewy crust.

FOCACCE: This large, flat bread, formed into squares or rounds, has a thick and chewy crust. It is often topped with strong herbs, sun-dried tomatoes, olives, or onions.

JEWISH RYE: This bread is made using natural sour starter, a bit of yeast, rye and wheat flours and is usually blended with caraway seeds.

FLAVORED BREADS: The flavors of these breads are dominated by added ingredients. Some popular flavored breads: Pearl Bakery’s Fig-Anise Panini, Grace Baking Co.’s Fred Bread, a bread loaded with toasted pecans, golden raisins and dried cranberries, Amy’s Bread’s Black Olive Twists, Zingerman Bakehouse’s Chocolate Cherry and Ecce Panis’s Plum-Fennel.
Bakers have seen more interest in whole and multi-grain bread.

still like these breads, but now only for special occasions.

What sells most today, from New York to California, are the simpler, plain breads, which lack flavors that compete with and overwhelm the main course. The American palate has become more sophisticated and is now able to appreciate the plainer, but deep flavor of these breads, says Glezer.

At La Panzanella, Pasciuto bakes one dough, an Italian peasant bread, which he then forms into rolls, two- and five-pound loaves, sometimes adding a wash of olive oil or altering the crust's thickness. The lesson: Artisan bread is not always consistent.

"With good bread you get a sense of trust. You can hold it in your hand, feel its weight. You know it's not a commodity. The customer feels a connection to the baker," he says.

Interest in Whole and Multi-Grain Bread

With increased awareness of the nutritional value of whole-grain foods, bakers have seen more interest in whole and multi-grain bread. At Amy's Bread, customers often request whole grain rolls with their soups. Greg Mistell, founder of Pearl Bakery in Portland, Ore., makes some breads with flour that has lower rates of extracting the natural bran and wheat, creating a wheat bread that is lighter and less filling.

"The whole wheat bread of ten years ago was very dense and too filling," says Mistell, a baker for almost three decades. "I like to make breads people eat alongside a meal, for breakfast, lunch or dinner."

Bakeries are having mixed success with breads made from organic flour, which generally costs twice as much as traditional flour. At Grace Baking, there has not been a great demand for organic bread, but they continue to offer a few breads with organic flour. Scherber has had success with her two-year-old line of rustic organic breads. At Pearl Bakery, Mistell is working with local farmers to provide high-quality flour using sustainable agricultural practices.

Artisan bread is soaring in popularity, while the larger bread category, which includes sliced bread, is remaining stagnant, according to Information Resources Inc. Some, like Grace Baking's Fred Doar, expect artisan bread to follow the path of gourmet coffee.

"Once you get this bread into people's mouths, it's hard to go back," says Doar, a former Andersen Consulting expert in the coffee business. "People are excited about bread again."

Robyn Pforn Ryan is a contributing editor to Specialty Food Magazine.

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