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**HOW A TEAM OF ÜBER-PASSIONATE CULVER CITY BAKERS
ARE MAKING A 100% CALIFORNIA LOAF**

WORDS BY LISA ALEXANDER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN GASTELUM



I

t's six o'clock in the morning at the bakery when that life-sustaining smell hits me. It's yeasty. Heavily yeasty—as if you've crawled inside a loaf of fluffy, wildly fermented whole grain bread. The music is rockin' as Alan feeds a tall plastic container of levain. Next to him are three more bins of **Lodge Bread Co.'s** beast, the natural starter that has been with them since he worked with bakers/owners Or Amsalam and Alex Phaneuf at the same West Hollywood restaurant. The beast is nameless, unlike some famous starters that are often imbued with an almost occult sheen.

"For me it's more of a science thing," Alan says. "It's a culture, like bacteria. A political power. A government."

The starter has doubled in two hours—a moist, sizzling blob as active as the original goop of the universe. Lodge bakes a dark, wet loaf that sells out every single day from their bustling bakery on West Washington Boulevard in Culver City. Alex, Or, Alan, and the team of bakers have committed to making a one hundred percent California whole grain loaf of unsifted hand-milled flour day in and day out, and they're doing it exceedingly well—well enough for the James Beard Foundation to recognize them as semifinalists in the 2017 category of Outstanding Baker.

Lodge is one of a handful of bakeries in a growing and passionate movement to bring back local heritage and ancient grains. The bakers rotate so they can each mill their own flour, shape and proof their loaves, and finally put them in the oven. "Hands on from start to finish," Alan says.

Lodge also uses 2,500 pounds of flour per week and it's been challenging to find all those California wheat berries to grind. As Alan tells me, "It's definitely been a process."

I find out why at the Gourmandise School's Grain Conference in Santa Monica this past fall—the brainchild of Clemence Gossett and Sabrina Ironside. The top floor of the











Santa Monica Place shopping center has been repurposed for farmers, millers, artisan and home bakers, and pretty much all bread-obsessed folks out there to attend seminars and workshops with some of the industry's best—including the owners of Lodge Bread.

The keynote speaker, Dave Miller, teaches attendees that the California grain movement exists because Monica Spiller raided the USDA Seed Bank back in the late nineties. After getting about a dozen different packets of seeds—Durum-Iraq, Ethiopian Blue Tinge, India-Jammu, Sonora—she convinced California farmers to grow them. Problem was, those tiny little packets only contained about twenty-five seeds, so it's no wonder it's taken years to grow enough grain. Everyone seems to agree that the process has been slow. Painfully slow.

Alex tells me how Lodge started in his backyard in Mar Vista. “We hand-mixed bread for about a year and sold it wholesale to customers and restaurants. It was an easy way for us to cut our teeth in the business.”

In person, Or and Alex finish each other's sentences with the easy back and forth and camaraderie of old friends and partners. Alex appears to be the front man, obsessed and detail-oriented, while Or seems more laidback and even-keeled. They both have great tattoos. I find myself staring at the wheat stalk on Or's forearm—a finely etched masterpiece straight out of a 19th century botanical print. On the table in front of them are huge 900-gram loaves, dark with big ears and a fabulous smell.

One of Lodge's first steps was to make a phone call to Central Milling, a massive operation out of Utah. They were told that the right type of flour wasn't available, so that forced them to get samples and start messing around.

“We were beyond fortunate at that point to have people tell us not to make white bread,” Alex says. “Coming from a chef-ing background, you're always looking for a source of gratification... sourcing specific flours for loaves was immediately key for us and we thought that would give us an edge and allow us to stay fresh and excited...we were leaving a world of making thirty different types of food in one day to making one loaf of bread. It was a unanimous decision to try to make exclusively whole grain loaves with unsifted flours, preferably off a mill that was our own.”

It's been three years since they decided to go for it full throttle with a one hundred percent California whole grain loaf. According to Alex, they only started getting it right about three months before our conversation this past fall. Even finding one farmer to get wheat was difficult. They tried cold-calling farms, going straight to dusty answering machines which nobody checked. They went back to Central Milling, asking for California-grown wheat, preferably of single origin, and miraculously they were paired with a farm that worked out great for a while.

“That was the only source to get us wheat from California,” Alex says. “But what it did for the bakery was unforeseen. It was invigorating to everyone who worked here, no matter if it was a barista, our pastry chef, our bakers. The cashier working at the front saw how much passion we were putting into our little slogan that we finally have a California loaf.”

Eventually they found their way to T&A Farms in Santa Barbara County. A voluble couple, Therese McLaughlin and Adam Novicki, grow wheat in Cuyama Valley. They are obviously thrilled with the joy they've brought to the bakers in the room at the Grain Conference. Within minutes, the audience is talking up the bags of flour they've managed to nab and arguing over fields and years like vintages of fine wine.

The T&A story is romantic—from the fifty-year-old John Deere combine which Adam and Therese bought from a Mennonite farmer and learned to drive and repair on YouTube, to how the whole process tested their marriage which, from the looks of it, survived swimmingly. They credit people like Or and Alex, who bought their product, for their own learning curve.

"We were in uncharted waters," Therese says. "But they were in a little deeper...it's because of these guys and our other friends in the baking community that we kept saying 'okay, yeah, we're going to [grow these heritage grains].' And now I realize that what we're eating is [real] food. That's a revelation to me. I grew up on Long Island where bread was white and sliced."

T&A's flour was gorgeous, but the process was still unpredictable. "You'd get twenty pounds of a certain flour and have the best three weeks of your life and then you couldn't get it again," Alex tells me. It's only been recently that Lodge mills a consistent supply of rye, spelt, ancient grains, and locally-grown Yecora Rojo in their very own mill, not necessarily having to rely so much on others.

Back in the bakery, Alan tells me to step back, "It's going to be loud." And it is—the oven belching steam onto hot stones inside sounds like a train gearing up to leave the station. Alan's ready to launch the bread he shaped and proofed the day before. The loaves sit wiggling in their little baskets ready to be upended on the loader, a conveyor belt that magically pulls down from the wall like a Murphy bed. He deftly lines up the uncooked loaves, scoring them with a swift calligrapher's stroke, and then pushes them into the oven to be cooked at 491 degrees. Another burst of steam and I'm pretty much convinced that no one could do this at home.

"Sure you can," Alan says. He tells me cast iron Dutch ovens work the same way, trapping the moisture inside so the bread steams itself and develops a hard crust, similar to professional ovens.

As Alan and I are talking, Julia, a woman with blonde, piled-up hair, bright leggings, and a nose ring, slips past. She starts to tell me about her circuitous path to making dozens of miso chocolate chip cookies per day. A degree in business marketing. Graphic design. Then finding her way into the pastry program at Manhattan Beach Post and

Fishing with Dynamite, where they won a James Beard Award in 2014 for their key lime pie. It's a familiar refrain when you talk to bakers who, I'm beginning to realize, have a signature personality. Strong-willed. Intense with a dollop of renegade.

Next to me is a pan of colossal sourdough cinnamon rolls, whorled and toasty brown as they wait to be bathed in luscious icing. Then there's the oat poppy seed and candied ginger cookies ready to be popped into the oven. And the stacked coffee cakes, crumbly and moist with a thick vein of espresso caramel running through.

"They've been so amazing here...and are open to anything I want to try," Julia says. "They're all so passionate and excitable. Such a joy to work here."

Later in the day, the dining room and patio fill with customers who are all happily devouring the bread-centric menu—their fluffy, tender pita bread is the star of the glorious fat pita, stuffed with roasted vegetables and tahini, and don't forget the perfect, bubbly pizza crust, the mandatory and delicious avocado toast, and that pastry cabinet up by the register, and on and on and on...

The shelves that were once spilling over with the day's bake empty completely and Alex looks around with obvious but quiet pride. "We've all built this together," he says. ♦

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BAKE YOUR OWN

A DIY OVEN BRINGS A COMMUNITY TOGETHER

BY LISA ALEXANDER



Westchester is a neighborhood of neat houses and well-tended lawns—the kind of place where residents can still go next door to borrow a cup of sugar. The Holy Nativity Episcopal Church sits in the center of this residential area, a low-slung building with a riot of feathery flowers outside. The church functions as a community center with a yoga studio, garden, and spaces for environmental activism and Zen meditation. It's also a place where you can fire your loaves.

Westchester Bakers, a group of passionate and self-declared “bread-heads”, came together two years ago to build their very own oven in the church's backyard. First up in the build was acquiring local clay for cob, a hand-molded material made from sand, clay, and water versus adobe which is poured into bricks. Eric Knutzen, one of the founders of LA Bakers, steered the group towards a basement excavation at The Museum of Jurassic Technology. For the next two weeks, they transported clay, mixed and glommed it onto a form in the backyard of the church. The finished oven looks like a dropped napkin, its curvaceous folds standing up on their own.

Silver-haired Paul Morgan is one of the group's chief fire whisperers. “The oven's still growing and cracking,” he says. He heats it up seven hours before a bake—temperatures inside reaching 800 degrees. The oven is called a black oven, which means the fire burns in the same place as the bread. Black ovens like this have been used since Neolithic times, five inches of mud gathering heat from the flames. When the embers are raked out, the temperature goes down gradually. First up are pizzas, then the bread.

“You can put a pig in there,” Paul tells me. “It'll cook all night and then in the morning the oven will be 300 degrees.” Potatoes

roast in four minutes flat. Bread cooks in twelve. The group is equally passionate about sourcing heritage and ancient grains. Some have their own home mills, while others meet at The King's Roost in Silverlake to get their flours ground. They're also eager to develop relationships with farmers like Mai Nguyen, one of the founders of the California Grain Campaign. She works the land in Santa Rosa, as well as Petaluma and Sebastopol, with heritage drought tolerant grains.

“We think about bread all the time,” says Dana Morgan. In addition to selling bread at farmers' markets, Dana teaches a seed-to-loaf class to fourth graders at Playa Vista and other elementary schools. This past year, she and the kids planted nine square feet of Yecora Rojo wheat, then tended and harvested it before they baked it into one loaf of bread.

The Reverend Peter Rood tells me he feels like the “chief midwife of creative things” at his church. He is also plainly thrilled, telling me that “it looks like a maverick group of bread-heads here, but one of the things we have in common is that we are drawn to simple things. What could be simpler than bread?”

Westchester Community Oven Pizza and Bread Bakes

When: 12:00pm for pizza; 2:00pm for bread on the second Saturday of every month.

Where: The Garden of Holy Nativity Episcopal Church, 6700 West 83rd St, Los Angeles

Bring your own dough and toppings. ♦