

A Little Bertinet Bread Among Companions

There was the feeling of a pilgrimage in the air, the hum of excitement of seekers on a mission among this dozen strangers gathered together from all over the world. We came to the teaching kitchen from Scandinavia, eastern Europe, the UK, the States. We were project managers. Aspiring restaurant cooks. Government employees. Writers. Retirees. We lived in places some of the others hadn't seen, conducted lives that others couldn't know, spoke native languages that sounded beautiful and would remain beautiful mysteries to most listening ears. We couldn't have been more disparate until our common passion for bread – the how of it, the feel of it under our own hands – brought us together. There, in that kitchen, our differences mattered little. Because when it came to wanting to bake good bread, we couldn't have been more alike.

The Bertinet Cookery School in Bath will accept individuals like us from all over the world for a one-day introductory bread baking class or a 5-day in depth bread course. Whether spending one day or five, owner-baker-instructor-fresh bread proponent-baking guru Richard Bertinet promises every attendee that all will leave the school armed with the skills for baking crusty, artisanal- style bread at home by applying a method long used by the bakers of France.

And this method is what we had traveled for.

Before the morning I showed up on the doorstep of Bertinet's school, I had racked up many years of baking bread both at home and during the two years spent as weekend baker at Quebrada Bakery in Arlington. Many a good sandwich loaf came to life under my hands: oatmeal, multigrain, whole wheat, white bread. What had eluded me, though, were the hearth-style loaves, those of thick crackling crust and airy but chewy crumb.

I had made attempts, found what I thought were reliable recipes and followed those, but my loaves turned out dense and heavy, with crusts that were sometimes thin, at other times leathery. I blamed the lack of a commercial oven, the dearth of proper flour, and my impatience for creating and nurturing the levains used by artisan bakers – those sour starters that take time and attention but give real bread depth of flavor and character. And yet, I would shrug, the standard method worked for me. Mixing, kneading on a floured surface, rising, deflating, rolling, shaping, rising again, baking: my bread was good. Tight crumbed but springy. Wholesome at any rate. Without chemicals or fillers. And from my own hands. I could have stopped learning given all that. The bread was fine.

And then in 2005, seduced by the promise of making a fougasse like the one on the cover, I added Richard Bertinet's brand new cookbook, *Dough*, to my bookshelves. Another bread book for the collection. Except that it isn't just another bread book.

In *Dough*, Bertinet asks bakers to come to bread baking freed from all previous experience with yeast dough. Approach bread in a new way, he urges, explaining in the book's introductory Bread Talk, "the kneading technique that most people are taught in Britain and America is quite

different from the one we use in France, which is all about getting air and life into the dough...instead of using the word kneading (which sounds too harsh), I prefer to talk about working the dough."

The French way of working the dough first involves mixing a dough that is wetter and stickier than the stiff dough most bakers are used to. One must next master that sticky mass and transform it by hand over the course of five or ten minutes from counter-adhering blob to manageable, silky, fleshy round without adding any additional flour through dusting the work surface, as bakers are also used to doing. A difficult transition, yes, but this instruction makes good sense. Less flour will result in a lighter interior.

Then there's also the matter of how to work during that five or ten minutes. Bertinet's cookbook comes with a 30-minute instructional DVD. Watch it and see Bertinet demonstrate the alternative to traditional kneading, watch him lift, slap, stretch, and flop the wet dough up and over itself, working repetitively and quickly in a near-balletic, all athletic motion as he adds air and finally tames the stickiness into smooth submission.

My few attempts at home with Dough and the basic white dough made from it lacked confidence...not in the method, but in myself. Sticky dough is difficult. Especially when one is used to something smooth, full of flour, and therefore easy to handle. The experience of easy bread and the old habits used to make it are hard to set aside, I found. Nagging at the back of mind as I tried to work in a new fashion was this: It doesn't feel like what I know, the repetitions feel foreign, ergo I must be doing something wrong. The book went back to the shelf; I went back to my tried and true ways.

But thoughts of making good bread never let go of me completely. My intent to bake artisan bread at home resurfaced last fall when I saw mention of the Bertinet Kitchen Cookery School in a newspaper article, coinciding with the plans I was making to visit friends in England. DVD instruction is helpful, but as a hands on learner, I knew real time coaching would be even more helpful. And what better motivator than the challenge of mastering a skill that had been, until then, elusive?

So there I was in Bath for my one-day class, at a butcher block work station with Suzanne from Norway (by way of Texas), whose husband gave her the 5-day course as a gift; and Anne and Vivi, daughter and mother from Denmark, there to conquer their dislike of the feeling of dough sticking to their hands. We and the eight other students worked and Richard Bertinet made the rounds, looking over shoulders, stopping our mistakes when necessary, reminding us to "Show the dough who's boss," and "Trust the method."

Watch words aside, Bertinet's coaching held very practical advice. His voice carried through the room, the French accent occasionally slipping into a London-British cadence as he taught. Bread baking is an athletic activity, like a dance, he noted. Relax the shoulders. Remember to stretch

the dough out wide as you also lift it upwards. One foot must be forward, one behind. Rock back as you lift and stretch the dough, rock forward as you slap it on the table.

And you must make a good thwack on the bench! You release your grip on the dough like a Frenchman shrugging. Allow the momentum of your efforts to thrust the dough over itself. This is the way you trap the air. Gather up the dough into a ball with the scraper. Don't lose the top! Walk the dough around the table to keep it from sticking, move with it, walk! Stretch and fold, rock back and forth, over and over. Feel the dough change, feel it become elastic. Feel how alive it is! That's how you know it is ready to rise. See the bubbles of air you have trapped inside. You want to keep that air, not beat it out. Remember this when ready to shape: We don't punch down the dough.

And on and on went the day. We got our hands very sticky, we struggled with the sticky dough, and we got past those first discomforts and made fougasses and breadsticks and foccacia. We had our heads filled with technique that would, Bertinet promised, all come back to us, his voice in our heads, once we returned home and practiced what we had learned.

The school, the brainchild of the French-born baker and his wife, Jo, has enjoyed positive publicity since its beginnings in 2005 because of a number of illustrious features and endorsements from the likes of the BBC, Ruth Reichl, and both IACP and Julia Child cookbook awards. But it is Bertinet's passion for bread and his ability (and willingness) to teach what he knows that makes the school a success.

"I grew up with bread in France," Bertinet told us after we had gone around the kitchen and introduced ourselves on that Monday morning. "I have always loved bread, and I have been baking it since I was 14. But it was only when I started teaching that I got really excited about baking these four ingredients together – flour, yeast, water, and salt – to make bread. I love seeing the smiles on students' faces when they take their first fougasse out of the oven. 'Look! I made that!'" And it's true: as the day progressed, his face broke into smiles at our delight when we brought our bread out of the ovens, teacher perhaps more excited than his students at the baking success.

After the baking was finished, lunch for the group was laid out on a long table. "The word companion comes from the Latin, meaning 'with bread,'" our teacher reminded us as we sat. "So our companions are the people we choose to share our bread with us." Instruction aside, students and teacher sat companionably and conversed about bread, artisan grains, travel, food, our homes, our work, all the dishes making up the delicious meal before us. We made up a gregarious crowd. Wine flowed. And there was our bread, the whole bounty of it, still warm from the oven.

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