



Baker's Retreat

At their beautiful getaway place in Southport, Master French Baker Lionel Vatinet and his wife, Missy, have a hands-on approach to their home away from home

BY ANDREA WEIGL • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES STEFIUK

It is shortly after 5 o'clock on a Thursday evening, and the living room of Lionel and Missy Vatinet's Southport home is filled with about a dozen people, both strangers and friends.

Lionel Vatinet, a guild-trained Master Baker originally from France, is prepping his kitchen for the baking class that has drawn these guests to his home. His wife, Missy, a petite, energetic blonde who spent much of her childhood on an 80-acre farm in Virginia, walks in the front door and introduces herself.

"Hi. I'm Missy," she says to one woman. Turning to another, she says, "Hi neighbor!" Within minutes, Missy is setting out bottles of Fat Tire and Bud Light beers and two French country wines, a Nicolas pinot noir and a Le Campuget grenache viognier. She also brings out chipotle pimento and bacon shrimp spreads along with platters of sliced bread, including ciabatta and Lionel's signature loaf, a light sourdough called La Farm, named after the couple's bakery in Cary, North Carolina.

The couple met in 1998 at a retail trade show in Chicago. Lionel was baking bread on the trade show floor for the San Francisco Baking Institute, and Missy was working for a large restaurant group based in Richmond, Virginia. They fell in love and decided to open their own bakery: Lionel would bake the bread, and Missy, who has a degree in hotel and restaurant management,

would handle the business side. They chose North Carolina and opened the bakery in late 1999. A few years later, Missy's retired parents moved to Southport, and in 2006, Missy and Lionel bought a house there, too — the charming white cottage right across the street. With two daughters not yet in school, the Vatinets spend a lot of time in their home away from home, reveling in the Brunswick County community's small-town charm.

"It's Mayberry," Missy says.

And this home is their retreat.

Although Lionel comes to the coast as often as he can to take a break from the daily stresses of their business in Cary, he cannot escape the urge to teach others how to bake bread. In fact, when Lionel came to the United States in 1991, he traveled the country teaching American bakers how to make traditional French breads. Even now, despite a vibrant business with a storefront bakery and café, stands at several farmers markets, a wholesale business that supplies seven Whole Foods stores across the state, and consulting gigs all over the country, Lionel still carves out time to regularly teach baking classes to the public. When a Southport friend asked several years ago if Lionel would teach a baking class here in Southport, he agreed, and so occasionally — like on this Thursday night in late autumn — the Vatinets open their home to willing students. Folks learn about the classes



via Facebook, fliers at the Southport Yacht Club, and word of mouth.

“He has a genuine quest to share the art and science of bread baking and transfer that passion,” says Missy.

This past fall, Lionel continued that quest by publishing the first of two cookbooks for the home baker, *A Passion for Bread: Lessons from a Master Baker*. The 300-page book is filled with step-by-step photos showing how to make baguettes, focaccia, ciabatta and even sourdough and whole grain breads.

Back in the Vatinets’ living room, Missy points out the bathrooms and tells the students where to find more beer and wine. “Don’t be shy,” she urges. “This home is your home.”

Moments later, Lionel emerges from a back bedroom wearing a white chef’s jacket.

“OK. It’s official,” he says.

Welcome to La Farm Southport.

The students move a few feet from the living room to the Vatinets’ open air kitchen with its double oven and silver KitchenAid mixer on the counter top. Lionel stands behind the butcher block kitchen island. A rustic dining room table, built by Missy’s father, is positioned to form a “T” with the island. Risers under the table’s legs elevate it so students can stand, watch Lionel, and use the surface to form and work dough. Within minutes, the Vatinets’ kitchen can be transformed into a baker’s workshop.

The students introduce themselves: Most are retirees, some are nurses, and one couple, Linda and Rick Pukenas, own the nearby Robert Ruark Inn and Southport Tours. The last student to introduce herself is Jean Hembree of Saint James, who drives to Cary twice a year to get a supply of the bakery’s most popular bread, a white chocolate baguette. She tells Lionel: “I met you years ago at La Farm. I was one of the ladies trying to get you to move here.”

In fact, it was La Farm customers from Southport who precipitated the chain of events that lured the Vatinets here in the first place. The couple were busy adding a café to their storefront bakery when some customers told

them about a bakery that was for sale in Southport. Missy’s recently retired parents offered to check out the town and the bakery for them. Missy and Lionel passed on the business opportunity in Southport, but her parents fell in love with the town and decided to move there from Virginia.

In the couple’s Southport kitchen, Lionel demonstrates how to make ciabatta dough, adding water to the flour and mixing the dough by hand. His French accent is thick and the students quiet down to listen to his instructions.

“I’m sure you still don’t understand me,” Lionel quips. “But after two hours, it will be much better.”

His hands, working the dough, speak for him.

Lionel spreads out the dough onto a jellyroll pan and tops it with olive oil, sautéed zucchini, caramelized onions, blue cheese and walnuts. Into the oven it goes so the students can enjoy it at the end of class. Meanwhile, the students move on to making their own ciabatta dough and then a basic pastry dough, trying to mimic Lionel’s technique. Lionel walks around the table helping the students and answering questions while the room fills with a divine aroma.

The two-hour class passes quickly. Near the end, as folks gather up to-go boxes filled with apple tarts and baked ciabattas, a few students leaf through a copy of Lionel’s book.

“The beauty of this book is it has over 450 pictures,” Lionel tells them. Being able to see the technique is key to learning how to make bread, he explains, noting that that’s why he only teaches hands-on classes.

As the class ends and students head for the door, Lionel gives them an even better offer: “If you have any questions, you can always knock on the door. We aren’t very far.”

Andrea Weigl is the award-winning food writer at The News & Observer. Her first cookbook, Pickles and Preserves: A Savor the South Cookbook, comes out in March from UNC Press.