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THE MAKING OF A BAKER

by JARKKO LAINE

Every baker has a story about his or her journey to the craft of bread making. For one baker, it was an accident; a summer job that stretched into winter and then into years to come. For another, it was a hobby that took over and became a second career. What was once just a question of “what if?” is now a passion. These many stories of what brought people to bread and how they then went from taking their first stumbling steps all the way to mastering the craft never fail to fascinate me.

This is why, when I learned about Lionel Vatinet and had the chance to chat with him, I was thrilled: the master baker had quite the story to share, from his early years at the centuries-old French guild of artisans, *Les Compagnons du Devoir*, to traveling the world, to helping get the San Francisco Baking Institute off the ground, to finally meeting his wife and settling down in Cary, North Carolina where they now run their bakery, [La Farm](#).

Lionel had just published his book, [A Passion for Bread](#), which was the perfect excuse to poke his mind and ask the baker some questions about his adventures as well as his relationship with bread and baking. We spent an engaging hour and half talking over the phone, mostly me asking him questions and then listening to his stories—but he did also manage to surprise me with a few questions about my impressions on his book and my thoughts on bread.



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FINDING A PASSION

Some thirty years ago, Lionel Vatinet was sixteen years old and trying to figure out what it was he wanted to spend a lifetime doing. He knew he wanted to see the world, and as—in his own words—he “wasn’t much of a student”, he felt that working with his hands would be the right choice. But what should that work be? Lionel’s parents ran a small café in the French town of La Rochelle, with customers representing different trades from plumber to electrician and auto mechanic. To help their son find his calling, they mined this network of customers and arranged for him to spend a few days in their professions, observing and experimenting with different lines of work. But it wasn’t until Lionel stepped into a local bakery that he got really interested. While at the other jobs, he grew bored in just a day or two, here, he immediately felt curious to learn more.

Just like any French boy of his age, he already had an appreciation for bread and the profession of a baker, he just had never thought of himself as the baker. Growing up, the scent of bread baking was always present, and bread was eaten at every occasion, from breakfast to dinner. “Bread has always been a part of me,” Lionel says. But as he tells in his book, until this time of contemplating career choices, “cooking and baking unquestionably remained my mom’s job.”

But now, standing in the bakery, he felt immediately at home. When I push him to say what was the thing that first made him realize he had found his passion, Lionel says it was the smell: “I’ve always been very sensitive to smells. So when you are close by to a bakery and they bake, it was magical.”

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"I knew I had found my calling. I had to learn how to make bread." he writes.

LES COMPAGNONS DU DEVOIR

The next decision was to pick the place where to learn the trade. Lionel's parents had heard of an ancient guild of artisans called *Les Compagnons du Devoir*. No one knows exactly how far the history of Les Compagnons du Devoir goes back, but the legend is intriguing: According to the tale, it all started with three men working together to organize the building of Solomon's temple in the ninth century B.C. These men consisted of King Solomon himself aided by two of the founding characters of the compagnon tradition: Maître Jacques, and Père Soubise. While there are no proofs for this claim, and no remains of even the temple itself have been found, what is clear is that the guild is ancient. The first recorded mentions of Les Compagnons du Devoir date back to the middle ages, around the twelfth century when guildsmen were regarded as the top craftsmen of their time, skilled constructors and traveling artisans who built the great cathedrals of Europe.

Despite changes in education and the reports of the slow death of the traditional ways of teaching and learning, the guild is still alive today, training young men—and in recent years, women—in a wide ranges of craft, including among others carpenters, plumbers, painters, and since the seventeenth century, as the only food-related craft in the guild,

bakers. The training is based on the principle of "the oldest teach to the youngest" and built around hard work and strong moral principles of community and sharing. The goal is not only to help the young trainees become accomplished craftspeople in their chosen fields but also persons of character who will be "positive representatives of the guild", as Lionel writes in *A Passion for Bread*.

With its focus on travel and apprenticing, "Les Compagnons" caught Lionel's attention: "It was a chance to travel. And this was a big piece for me. You leave your own family, go into a new family, traveling all over France, Europe and so on and so forth." he says.

The guild's philosophy and tradition inform their work already starting at the entrance examination. First, an applicant needs to have a recommendation from someone inside the guild—a distant relative of Lionel's was an upholsterer trained in the guild and agreed to be his sponsor. But that's not enough. In addition to the recommendation, an applicant needs to go through a week of testing during

which other Compagnons observe the applicant, judging his character and potential.

So, one day, Lionel's father and grandfather drove the young man from their home in La Rochelle all the way to Bordeaux, a city approximately two hundred kilometers away, where he stayed for a week living in a dorm with other applicants and working at a bakery.

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go back and teach you to read, for example,” as Lionel says. But mostly, what the week tests is the applicant’s motivation and aptitude for this type of work. At this point, applicants don’t yet know anything about bread making, so they help with all kinds of daily tasks from organizing tools to cleaning the bakery, and most importantly, work through the night shift just like they would later as bakers. This tests the young applicant’s motivation, but also gives them an idea on what to expect from both the training and the work that follows after it.

“They give you a very simple task, and then you work ten, eleven, twelve, fourteen hours... Do you have the stamina to stay awake working for so long? And you do this four or five days in a row. They put you to test to see if you are pleasant when you are tired. And you live in community, and you need to share, even when you don’t know somebody. Are you going to

be a social or antisocial?” Lionel says.

“But as importantly, the tests are there to make sure you are going to like what you engage yourself with.”

Lionel did and so he worked hard, not wanting to fail. “I did want to prove a lot. For me, but for also for my surrounding family. So it was a ‘no-no’ for me to fail.” he says.

After the week was over, Lionel returned home and waited anxiously for a response.

“You’re nervous, a little bit, because you don’t want to fail. And you still don’t know if you’re going to be accepted or not. They give you an answer much later to tell you yes, you’re going to be accepted—or not. So you have always this stress going about it.”

Eventually, the yes arrived, and Lionel started his apprenticeship. He was assigned to work with a baker in the city of Tours, and so his journey to becoming a baker began.

BEING AN APPRENTICE

No matter which route you take to becoming a baker, the only way to learn the craft is through countless hours of practice. There are no shortcuts. And this is something an apprenticeship, be it in a guild like Les Compagnons du Devoir, or simply working with a baker does better than any other form of training. Working alongside accomplished master bakers, a Compagnon gets to learn from the best while doing the work starting from day one.

The training at the guild is organized in phases: it starts with an apprentice period, followed by the Tour de France—a journey across France working with different bakers, and ends in completing a masterpiece work, a demonstration of having mastered the craft. It is also possible to join the guild for the Tour de France having already completed an apprenticeship on your own.

During the first phase, the apprentice is assigned to work with a guild member to learn the basics of the trade. This time, from one to two years, he or she lives in one of the over 50 houses of Compagnons scattered around France, under the strict but loving care of a mother figure, La Mère. The apprentices living in the house are each practicing their own crafts but gather together for dinner and other shared activities which teaches them the community values of the guild.

While apprenticing to become a baker, an apprentice still needs to pass the same exams and tests as he would studying in a conventional school for bakers. However, there is a big difference in the way the knowledge is passed, as well as the principles of the compagnonhood:

“Les Compagnons is a society inside a society. You need to go through all the academical tests required by the French government, but inside Les Compagnons you have a different level as you grow, and you get responsibility as you show



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After the first year or two, if the guild decides the apprentice has shown the right kind of attitude and promise and is advancing well in his studies, he can apply for adoption into the guild. In the adoption ceremony, the apprentice becomes what is called an “aspirant” and he is given a new name based on the region of the country he is from. This is where becoming a Compagnon really begins. Lionel received his name, “Île-de-France”, which he then proudly carried until the end of the training, when he was accepted to the guild as a full member after completing his Tour de France. During the Tour de France, aspirants travel around France (or these days, the world) living in the houses of Compagnons and working with different professionals in different regions, six months to a year in one location at a time.

“Each region has something different to offer, so it’s why also when you travel, you change regions to learn new specialties and to be with somebody who has a different technique. So this is what you’re going to see the most, by changing your environment. Each region has a different characteristic of weather, of flour, so you don’t have a choice, you’re going to learn from them.” Lionel says.

Apprenticing is hard work with long hours and not very much praise. It develops your skills, but as Lionel found during his training, also your character. He says he loved the guild for many reasons, including the possi-

bility to travel and being part of a community, but mostly about how, through its focus on spirituality, it made him who he is today.

“You know, they don’t tell you constantly how good you are. They tell you what you need to work on. This is a big difference. They are not tender either. They are truthful to the individual.” Lionel says.

“It’s a challenge too, instead of going to dance, they ask you to work eighteen hours a day. When you are sixteen, seventeen or

eighteen years old you have a choice to make. And they make it very clear what this choice is going to bring you. It’s to continue to tread on your road. And they don’t talk about money, you know this is about to come later if you get good at it, that’s it.”

Working hard to reach the results you are after, and not getting the praise prematurely prepares you for not only a great career as a baker but also force you to grow as a human being:

“You’re put to test. They make you question yourself and where you are: What’s next for you? How you approach life? Don’t be satis-

fied with what you are now. There’s always a goal to reach. And when you reach this one, there’s the next one.”

Another important part of being a Compagnon is the pledge to give it all away. Lionel stresses that this is something agreed on a honor code, there is nothing signed. “It’s not the military,” he says. But as an artisan enters the guild and becomes a

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Compagnon, he or she pledges to devote his life to teaching, sharing, and preserving the art and science of bread baking.

"You don't sign anything. It's only moral, you know, it's not a sect, not military, it's nothing like that. It's just: we came together to teach you, to make you a part of what the guild is about. And you stay if you follow the rules. If you can grow with this type of an outfit, you are there until the end, but if you leave, you can not come back."

So, during the training, be it during the apprenticing or the Tour de France, whenever bakers from guild were in town, they would come and share their knowledge and experience with the aspirants. There were no secrets.

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One such encounter was with Professor Raymond Calvel, the bread scientist and professor of baking known for reviving French bread making as well as describing the autolyse method of dough development. Although Professor Calvel wasn't a member of the guild, as a supporter, he often arranged to meet with the guild's apprentices. And of course, in addition to learning from the masters, the Compagnon aspirants learn from each other, both their peers and more advanced students. Lionel says he was a part of a "fantasy generation", fortunate to practice along fine bakers such as Eric Kayser—whom he calls his Compagnon godfather—Didier Rosada and Dominique Homo.

"You were surrounded by youngsters. When I started, I was seventeen and it was this whole nucleus of people were between sixteen and eighteen years old. We started together and it was very competitive, but it was a friendly competition. Because



we were helping each other. So all this was magical, at some point. And as you grow, you share. Everybody goes to a different region but you meet in one city and you share your experience, and you know the next year you are going to be in charge of a team from two to twenty kids, whatever. You learn a lot from the people who are working there, side-by-side to teach you and to show new techniques." Lionel says.

This ethic of sharing never left Lionel Vatinet's mind, and since finishing his training he has always included teaching in his work in one way or another.

GREAT BREAD

After completing his Tour de France, to enter the guild as a full member, the aspirant is required to create his final work, the masterpiece, the chef-d'oeuvre, in which he demonstrates that he has understood the

key concepts of his trade. In his book, Lionel writes: "Whatever craft, the masterpiece must show that the apprentice has gained full comprehension and mastery of the most difficult aspects of their chosen field."

In the case of bread making, this is fermentation.

Lionel's masterpiece work is his interpretation of what great bread is: a classic, slowly fermented big country sourdough loaf with a touch of whole-wheat flour that he today calls the "La Farm Bread."

Being French, bread has always been a part of Lionel's life, from waking up to his father toasting Pain de Campagne to using a piece of baguette as an utensil to collect all those little remains of soup or sauce left on the place.

"For us, bread is like to us a second hand. We eat bread for any purpose.", Li-

onel says. "You don't use a knife, you push with your bread. You eat bread with everything, at the dinner, and at lunch. We were not so much of a sandwich country of people, in our family, but our bread was always there. From morning to dinner, for sure."

While the most typical bread at the time in Lionel's family was the baguette, one of the breads that made the most lasting impression on him as he was growing up was a big loaf he got to eat on visits to the countryside. The bread is shown on the first pages of his book: a sourdough bread almost the size of the boy holding it.

"It's me, when I was six or seven years old and we visited a family on the countryside. There was this baker making this big country bread. Every time we went there, before returning to Paris, we'd buy this bread because it was different than a baguette. It was real sourdough bread. So, yes, I already had some idea about great bread."

This bread along with the famous "miche" from the Parisian baker *Lionel Poilâne* were both examples that shaped Lionel's ideas on what great bread was, and therefore also what he wanted his masterpiece to be like: good old-fashioned, slow fermented bread France used to be famous for. An artistic interpretation that paid homage to the bread that families used to make and bake in the village community ovens throughout centuries.

As Lionel tells me, it wasn't until the second world war when the Americans brought white bread with them that the French people who had been forced to eat dark bread during the dark times quickly embraced the ideals of "everything white, everything fluffy, everything fast".

"This definitely changed a lot, the perspective, you know, of what's good bread today." Lionel says. "When I left, twenty, almost twenty-five years ago, I think eighty to ninety percent of bakeries were not good. They were making these fluffy, white, un-flavorful,

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dried out, dry, no-fermentation breads.”

Since then, slowly, through a lot of work by artisan bakers, including many members of Les Compagnons du Devoir, the traditional ways of making bread have been making their way back into the buying audience’s minds and hearts.

“But it’s difficult to change people’s minds, because people buy with their eyes. They look at volume: it is big, it is good. Not true. This simplistic way of looking at bread misses the essence of grains, the passion of fermentation, the technical artistry of the miller. Great bakers respect fermentation and bring nutritional loaves to their community.”

Since 1999, when after years of traveling the world teaching bakers and further improving his knowledge about bread making (in 1999, he was one of the coaches leading the American team of bakers to victory at the *Coupe*



du Monde de la Boulangerie) he teamed up with his wife Missy to open a bakery of their own, Lionel has been spreading the message about great bread to a receptive customer base in Cary, North Carolina.

"It was the next step, a natural step for me. I wasn't going to be a teacher in a classroom for any longer. I did prove what I had to prove teaching in a great program and now I was ready to say yes. we can try!" Lionel says.

"We educated the customers by giving out a lot of samples. We also needed to change the culture of how people shop for bread. It's an every day thing. It's not monthly, something you put in your fridge..." Lionel says.

The work paid off and customers found the bakery, which has now grown to include a café.

"They've been very supportive of whatever we do. They are behind us and we continue to grow with them. Five years ago we opened a café, and this changed the floor plan a little bit, but it compliments the bread so well. We make sandwiches, soups, and salads. When you come to La Farm, you know you can have five minutes of pleasure." Lionel says with pride in his voice.

GIVING BACK

When Lionel and Missy opened La Farm, it was clear to them that teaching was always going to be a part of it. It was something Lionel had always loved to do, but also a part of the pledge to his guild.

"When you do your Tour de France, it is five to ten years, but after that, you still have many more years to live and to give back. It is very important to give back, because all of this has always been on bona fide. People are not paid, they do it on their free will. You go there because you believe, because it has been given to you before. This is how we've been going on for centuries." Lionel says. "Compagnonnage is a life commitment."

"So yes, for years, I have been taking in some young kids, because it's not the Tour de France anymore. It's the World Tour. So this is another option for them to see what we do here and what's different to what they do in France. And there is also the language, the possibility to learn English." Lionel says.

But new Compagnons are not the only ones benefiting from Lionel's passion for sharing his knowledge. He has also consulted for large par-bake programs such as Cottage Lane in New Zealand, Terra Breads in Vancouver, and Harmons Grocery which now has a bread program in all 17 stores throughout Utah. And at La Farm, he holds baking classes for home bakers who want to learn to bake better bread.

"It's amazing. They are so enthusiastic, so thirsty for learning. They want to be good. They put all their heart and soul into it. So for me it's a pleasure. Let me tell you, when your audience wants to learn, I have a lot of fun. This is great." Lionel says and continues to explain that by teaching he is also still learning every day:

"Patrick Joubert has said to teach is to learn twice. It's very true. I've been learning more by teaching than when you go somewhere to learn from somebody. For me, it has been a real joy. I've been amazed."

"But what I like about teaching is that when you observe them, you can see where the difficulty is, and you can help them. To change the position of their hand, or explain what has been misunderstood, to show them a different way. Because it's not just one technique, it's also how you adapt it."

The combination of working at the bakery and teaching home bakers works well for him as it allows him to keep doing the work he loves.

"I like to do this for a class, for a day, for a week, it is great. I can not be a teacher in a school, for example, for year in and year out."

"I've had the opportunity to work with



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some great bakers, teachers, and business people, and watch in awe as others become the best in their field. I like to be alive, I like to be next to them, you know, really to share their experience by, through touch, because there is something sensual to it. So this is what is important."

The new book, [A Passion for Bread](#), published in November 2013 by Little, Brown and Company, is a natural follow-up to the teaching, and so from the beginning, it was clear to Lionel that he wanted to capture the same hands-on experience on its pages, to bring the professional side of baking and centuries old teachings to the home baker. The way to do this was through photos so that a reader could get as close as possible to the experience of practicing next to Lionel in his kitchen or at his outdoor oven.

"The condition for me was for the book to be visual, like I learned from in my youth." Lionel says.

When he got to work and, together with the photographer, started shooting the photos for the book, it quickly became clear that this meant hundreds of photos. After the first recipe, he already had that more than eighty photos and it looked like there was going to be at least seven hundred of them! The editor, Michael Sand wasn't ready for quite that many, but he was supportive. So, when you read the book today, you'll find in it four hundred seventy pictures. The condition of being visual was fulfilled and every part of the bread making process is presented in a series of clear step-by-step photos.

"The second thing is doing things professionally. What I do is professional. What I do as home baker is the same thing: Use a scale. Use a thermometer. Control the temperature. You don't need a fancy oven, but building on a hundred years of experience, I want to give you some consistency with your product." Lionel adds.

"And don't hide anything. It's not about a recipe. It's about the knowledge of you to replicate the recipe. So we share this knowledge on that. We try to be simple, so it's been written down in a way that anybody can read it and understand. And with a picture it doesn't matter if you speak Finnish, French, Chinese, you know, it's all right. You can duplicate that."

But in the end, a book is only a beginning, a tool to get you going. To get to great results, you need to practice—but with tips from a master baker, you get a head start.

"This gets you started, and after that you are on your own. And you can be as creative as you want." Lionel says.

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QUESTIONS FOR A MASTER BAKER

In addition to chatting with Lionel myself, I asked you to send your question (on our mailing list as well as on [Facebook](#)) and passed them on to the master baker. Here's what he had to say. Some questions that were very similar to each other were combined into one question, so you might not find your exact wording here, but if you submitted a question, you still should find the answer in this list.



QUESTION: *I just received a set of wicker proofing baskets. Is there a lining that I need to use with them or can I use them bare, as is?*

ANSWER: Either way, if you do not use a liner, dust with flour.



Q: *In how many ways is kneading important to the final loaf of bread?*

A: When you mix by hand you are not powerful enough to change or alter the gluten structure. Develop the feeling in your hands.

Q: *How do you differ the amount of hydration of your bread? Do you always use the same hydration level, or which are the most popular hydrations you use?*

A: All this depends on the absorption of the flour. Two of the most popular are Ciabatta, which is usually 80% and above, and French Bread, between 70% and 75%. We don't make bagels at La Farm, but they are a stiff bread, with a hydration level of 45-50%.



Q: *How does modern health awareness for whole foods (such as whole grain organic flour) affects, if at all, traditional French breads baking, such as Baguettes. Does tradition win? Or is there a place (and market) for whole-grain flour Baguette? Are people today looking for that kind of shift?*

A: Awareness of people about fiber, we are getting there... People love their white flour and tradition.



Q: My Pain au Levain's crust is tooth-breaking, like turtle shell. How do I fix this?

A: Levain bread makes a crustier, chewier product. If you want a softer crust, add some fat to the dough.



Q: It takes me two days to make a loaf of sourdough bread and it is difficult to charge \$5 per loaf and yet with less technique and skill I can put together a tart or cake and people have no qualms parting with \$15-\$20 for it. How do we get the "general public" to appreciate this and elevate bread from its commodity status to a product that requires more time, skill, technique and passion to consistently deliver than a sponge that can be put together in five minutes?

A: Educate your customers on the process, sample your product, show why it's worth \$5 per loaf. "If you want a fresh loaf of bread, when you are sleeping, we are baking."



Q: It seems as if the professional bakers make always a success baking with a quality bread. I look at them in envy. But, really, do you always bake a successful bread?

A: No, we are very critical of our breads. We always try to understand how to make it better. Take nothing for granted, adapt to new flour, training, weather...



Q: You have been offering classes for some time now. What would you say your students that are most concerned

about? What is the hardest thing to explain to them, to make them understand when it comes to artisan bread?

A: Expressing feeling, developing how to feel the loaf (kneading, shaping). Each dough is different... This is hard to explain.



Q: Are there any bread festivals (like the one in Asheville) that you regularly participate in, or conferences like the Kneading Conference? What is it you get out of participating in these?

A: Atlanta Food & Wine, Charleston Wine + Food, Euphoria, TerraVita. I love to share knowledge and meet people who are passionate as I am about bread.



Q: What would you say are the main differences in American flour as opposed to French (or other places where you have baked)? What is the easiest way to overcome differences in flour absorbency? (This is a topic I'm interested in as the flour here in Australia is a lot less absorbent than US flour. I regularly knock back hydration by 5-10% when using US recipes.)

A: You need to adapt to the ingredients, understand the feeling, and develop structure profile by adding more or less water. American flour is much stronger and has a higher protein amount than French flour.



Q: *Is it possible to mix ingredients for an enriched sweet dough and keep in the fridge after the bulk fermentation to use next day? I want to improve the taste and structure of the dough, but my concern is about the yeast overpowering the flavor or affecting the final rise.*

A: We don't cover this in the book, but an enriched sweet dough like a brioche, proof for 45 minutes to an hour, fold and put in the fridge overnight. It'll be fine.



Q: *In the little store in my little town we can not always get bread flour. However, we can get a package of Vital Wheat Gluten. If I added 2 tablespoons of VWG, would that be enough for a two loaf recipe? Is it really important to use bread flour? I use Robin Hood unbleached all purpose exclusively and have never had any trouble with my bread. However, I am branching out into artisan bread baking and I want to be sure.*

A: Typically, you should use 10-12% protein level in flour. An experienced baker can use all-purpose flour, but it is a bit trickier. However, if it works for you, then go for it!



Q: *How do you define your bread? I mean the idea behind your bread, your style?*

A: Respect of fermentation... That's the essence of baking.



Q: *Recently I have had issues with my Pumpernickel bread. When I bake it in a boule shape it does not cook all the way through. The crumb is awesome for the upper 2/3 of the loaves. However, it is still under baked at the bottom. I do not understand why: it sits directly on a the stones. In a bread pan (rectangular and pullman) it bakes up fine. What am I missing and overlooking?*

A: Hard to tell without seeing it. Only thing that comes to mind is maybe when you are shaping the boule, the loaf is too tight.



Q: *I've read recipes that call for adding salt when doing the kneading before first rise. And most other recipes call for adding it during the initial mix of flour, water and yeast. What is the difference? Also, which salt to use? Sea salt, kosher, mineral salt or iodized salt. Which salt works best with the yeast?*

A: Doing autolyse, add salt after initial mix. As to what salt to use: Salt is salt. If you use coarse salt, dilute in your water for better incorporation.



Q: *What is your preferred brand and type of flour commonly available in American supermarkets? I use King Arthur organic bread flour and all purpose flour, but these are not available everywhere! Do you have a preferred national brand?*

A: Always look for unbleached, unbromated flour, not particular to a certain brand. We use NC Carolina Ground.



Q: *When your great hobby or passion becomes your way of earning a living, isn't it dangerous? For me, it's very scary. Your passion becomes your duty, your every-day obligation, how do you overcome that fact? What makes you to continue being so passionate about bread?*

A: To be able to combine the sharing of the knowledge by teaching others.



Q: *When baking with locally-grown grains, do you identify unique flavors, when tasting the baked bread?*

A: Yes, you can taste different flavors based on where the grain has been grown.



Q: *Have you changed your baking process as a result of using locally-grown grains, to showcase certain flavor aspects of the flour?*

A: We adapt to the ingredients. Fermentation and the grain will definitely bring a different aroma. It's hard to explain.