



PRESS RELEASE

Press contact : Jacky G. Lesellier CONM CMA

SUNDAY TIMES (29 mars 1992)

Chic in the basket - gourmet breads for the upper crust

The word "gourmet" strictly a noun, has been hijacked of late. In its new adjectival form it confers cachet and exoticism on food products not normally noted for their appeal to the connoisseur. Thus we have had "gourmet ice-cream" (Häagen-Dazs as opposed to Wall's) and "gourmet cookies" (Ben's or Millies as opposed to Cadbury's or Mc Vities). The latest food product to be elevated and promoted by the epithet "gourmet" shows the trend taken to its logical conclusion. We are now in the throes of a craze for "gourmet breads". The trend for fancy breads can be traced back to the foodie one-upmanship, that took hold in the country's fancier restaurants in the 1980s., as part of the nouvelle game of colour co-ordination. Miniature crusty warm rolls began to appear flecked with green herbs, or dark brown pieces of caramelised onion. Next they were coloured pink with tomato, paste, nearly-black with dark rye flour or uniform green with spinach purée.

It is game still played by the big-name chefs - Mosimann, Blanc, Ladenis and Koffman. But what brought unusual breads to the attention of the less elite (or at least less moneyed) restaurant - going public was the sudden surge in popularity of what is now called New Wave Italian cooking, coinciding with the founding of a small bakery operation called La Fornaiia.

Specialising in Italian country breads, La Fornaiia quickly found a market among the new crop of restaurants who needed a regular supply of the right kind of bread for the trendy,

New Wave signature dish, bruschetta (char-grilled bread, rubbed with garlic, generously trickled with olive oil, and topped with any number of delights from chopped sundried tomatoes to grilled aubergines or black olive paste + the king of things, in fact, that are beginning to end up inside the bread).

La Fornaiia's managing director, Peggy Dannenbaum, has been to business school and speaks accordingly: "we're now the market leaders in the gourmet bread business. Restaurant supply was never meant to be part of the plan, but such as Antonio Carluccio (of the Neal Street Restaurant) kept coming into our shop and buying up half our supply". She now supplies many chefs, though her principal business is with large-scale retailers, notable examples being Cullens and Marks & Spencer. La Fornaiia's range includes the "recipe breads" such as stradello colorato - a tri-coloured extravaganza of spinach, tomato and plain white: or segale souro - a black rye bread flavoured with caraway seeds: or pane con noce, a delicious moist brown bread flavoured with sultanas and walnuts. These, along with the ubiquitous ciabatta (crusty olive oil bread with large air pockets), are to be found at such smart London eateries as Kensington Place, the River Café, La Famiglia and Cibo.

But la Fornaiia is not without rivals - in quality if not in scale. Jacky Lesellier is doing for traditional French baking what Peggy Dannenbaum has done for the Italian loaves. It's hard to imagine anyone more passionate about bread: "Fine bread is like fine wine - you have to match your bread to your food," he says. To prove it, he has created a rye bread especially for serving with oysters and other seafood.

Lesellier's company, Bagatelle, is several years younger than la Fornaiia, but already you need more than one hand to count the Michelin stars among his clients. Albert Roux at Le Gavroche buys a pecan and raisin bread - "Dauphinois" - which he believes to be "the finest accompaniment to stilton and blue cheese". Mere mortals can find Lesellier's breads and pâtisseries in his shop, Bagatelle, at 44 Harrington Road in South Kensington. But the biggest kudos is attached to those chefs who insist on baking their own. At the starry end of the scale, these include Marco Pierre White, whose bread is actually made by his sous-chef Roger Pizey, and Pierre Koffman at La Tante Claire, who, Lesellier claims, "makes the best bread in London".

More down-to-earth are the loaves of Sally Clarke, who is such a bread-head that she has a bakery next to her restaurant in Kensington. Her breads draw on the Californian health food tradition of mixed grains and sour doughs, as well as acknowledging the Italian passion for bread with bits in it.

But if any restaurant is worth a visit just for the bread, it must be the Museum Street Café, by the British Museum. Here Gail Koerber, formerly a sous-chef at Clarke's and now co-chefing with mark Nathan, rises at five every morning to cook just enough bread for the day's service at the Café - two or three varieties from a repertoire of more than a dozen. "Our bread is a bit like a canapé," says Gail. "It's the first taste a customer has of what we do here, so we want it to be good."

THE BAGATELLE
CONCEPT Ltd

704-711 Tudor Estate

Abbey Road

London NW10 7UW

Tel : 020 8453 8000

Fax : 020 8453 8001

Order Department

Tel : 020 8453 8025

Fax : 020 8453 8026

BAGATELLE
BOUTIQUE

44 Harrington Road

London SW7 3NB

Tel : 020 7581 1551

Fax : 020 7591 0517