



# Flour power

*Forsaking labour-saving techniques and lifestyle in favour of tradition and a better product, Australia's artisan bakers are a movement on the rise – the best thing since unsliced bread.*

Passion. It's a cliché that blights the food world. Clichés, though, have to come from somewhere, and in the time that I've spent wandering around talking to people who produce and cook quality food for a living, it's been something of a constant – committed winemakers, obsessive cheesewrights, dyed-in-the-wool fishos, you name it. But bakers are an order unto themselves. The lot of the baker is known to even the passing observer as a hard one, and when you're talking about those of their number who are trying to branch out and do something different or better, it's tougher still. The horrible hours and nocturnal existence are just the beginning. They take the idea of this passion to almost biblical lengths with their stories of mental stress and physical hardship, at least in the beginning.

Sonoma Baking Company's Andrew Connole speaks of doing nothing but sleeping and baking for weeks on end, waking up in knots from kipping by the ovens. Phillippa Grogan spent much of the first year she set up the now-famed Phillippa's wondering if she had made a terrible mistake, while Michael Klausen and Tony Papas look back on the early days of Brasserie Bread and shudder at the way it consumed

their lives for a time. Melbourne baker Tony Dench has asthma, the degree to which the flour and hours contribute to it can only be guessed. All this, too, not for the money, not for fame, and not to pick up hotties. All this for bread.

But what bread. And what satisfaction. Without wading into the staff-of-life stuff, baking the best bread seems to engender not so much mere pride among these people as a hard-won satisfaction that borders on the serene. The bakers we are talking about here are, to varying degrees, artisans, people who use their craft to transform raw ingredient – flour, water, salt, yeast – into culinary and cultural product, as honestly, directly and transparently as possible.

"It's creamy and certainly not white," says Tony Dench of the product that is his living, if not his obsession. "It's got a lovely crust, which can be anything from dark brown to tinges of black. The bitterness of that crust is offset by the creaminess and the sweetness of the inside. It's got a very open texture and a sour finish. It's chewy, it's got some body. It's good for you, and it's something you can rely on to be fulfilling."

It's not that common to hear people talking bread in this much detail or with this much care. The recent history of



**These bakers are artisans who transform raw ingredients into a culinary and cultural product as honestly and directly as possible.**



**BAKE MY DAY**  
Tony Dench and his Melbourne bakery, Dench (top and centre). Opposite: Sydney's Brasserie Bread.

bread in Australia saw independent bakeries become an early casualty of the industrialisation of food. Beyond the chains and hot bread shops, which typically mix and bake to set commercial formulas with as little human interference as possible, anyone seeking greater quality in their bread has had to look to those surviving European traditionalists or to what have unkindly been dubbed 'hippie bread shops' to find something with a little more texture and flavour. It was in the 90s that this situation really began to change with the appearance of bakeries like Natural Tucker, Phillipa's and Brown's in Melbourne and, later, Babka, and Infinity and Victoire in Sydney – establishments that had a commitment to producing bread of restaurant-quality.

A new generation of bakers, meanwhile, has taken up the challenge, staring down the horrible hours and notorious fickleness of dough, and building on the achievements of their peers with an eye to traditional breadmaking techniques. Melbourne's Baker D. Chirico and Sydney's Brasserie Bread quickly captured large slices of their cities' restaurant bread market, and more recently Knead, Dench, Noisette and Wildflour in Melbourne and Sonoma and Bourke Street Bakery in Sydney have each found their own fond followings. Only some choose to supply restaurants, but all do a roaring trade with the general bread-buying public through their retail stores.

Phillippa Grogan, the namesake of Phillipa's, the famed Melbourne bakeries, stands apart because she hung out her shingle more than a decade ago after baking in London for some of the nine years she worked in Sally Clarke's acclaimed restaurant, Clarke's. Where other bakers speak of their focus on artisanal baking, she prefers the term boutique. "When I came back from the UK I saw that the

boutique bakery was about to have its time, and there wasn't a lot of it in Melbourne. There were the European-style bakeries and there were the healthy, hippie dippy-type bakeries, but we wanted to position ourselves quite differently. We wanted to take a luxury-goods approach and appeal to people who were passionate about food." Today Phillipa's is a byword for upmarket baking, but, Grogan says, it was hardly a matter of overnight success. "For years, I'd ask myself – why don't I just go and get a proper job? They'll pay me holiday pay, I won't have any responsibility, why am I doing this to myself?"

Hers has not been an isolated case. Brasserie Bread takes its name from the Bayswater Brasserie, the groundbreaking Sydney restaurant started by Tony Papas and Michael Klausen (the pair's golden touch also extends to Allpress Espresso and fine-diner The Boathouse at Blackwattle Bay), and it was the fruitless search for good bread for their restaurant that drove the pair to try their hand at making the kind of sourdough bread they'd seen in Europe.

"When we started baking," says Klausen, "nobody understood what we wanted to achieve with long fermentation and cold fermentation, so we collected whatever we could in France and the US; we found a recipe from [Los Angeles artisan bakery] La Brea and really took it apart and started from scratch by making a sourdough starter and taking it from there." Through that process, they learned a lot. They killed the starter. They got a new starter. They tried again. "We baked two loaves, then we baked 12, and we decided that those 12 loaves were going to be what we built on." Twelve years down the track, they're producing thousands of loaves a day from a large bakery in Banksmeadow that doubles as an award-winning café. They supply everyone from Quay to →



FRIENDS IN KNEAD  
David McGuinness  
(left) and Paul Allam  
of Bourke Street  
Bakery (right).



Guillaume at Bennelong, as well as cafés and delis around Sydney, but Klausen says it all comes back to those original dozen loaves. "Until I stepped away from running the restaurant, we had some shocking hours of work doing this. After I finished at the restaurant at 11 or midnight, I'd been down in the cool room rolling pastry. We think back on that now and are just bowled over. Even then it was very hard to find people with the kind of integrity towards the product that we wanted. We want to have a high-volume of sourdough bread that still looks like the 12 loaves we pulled out of the oven when we first baking. That's our focus."

Andrew Connole is no stranger to focus. He left his chef's apprenticeship in 1997 after his dad found an old bakery in Bellata in country New South Wales, and he and brother Christian decided to take up baking. Travelling to the San Francisco Bay Area of California to look for plans for the wood-fired oven, he met Alan Scott, a Tasmanian who had developed a reputation as the best wood-fired brick oven builder after living in the States for years. Scott introduced Connole to Chad Robinson, who now runs the famed Tartine Bakery. Robinson's Bay Village Bakery became the Connole's model for naturally leavened wood-fired bread. Flash forward to 2007, and Sonoma, named as a tip of the hat to its Northern Californian inspiration, supplies a sizeable chunk of Sydney's top cafés and restaurants with their bread, and has a large production bakery/café in Waterloo in addition to its Glebe retail café. Their soy and linseed, studded with whole soybeans, is one of the most interesting loaves we've seen.

"From September 98 through till May 2000, Christian and I would feed the starter on a Wednesday night, get up on the

Thursday morning at six, jump in the car and drive 540 kays, get to Bellata, chop firewood, weigh up all the flour, sleep for a couple of hours, get up at 10 at night, start mixing, fire the oven and bake a couple of hundred loaves of bread. Then we'd throw the bread in the back of the wagon and come back to Terrigal at seven the following night and sell it around town." One of Connole's colleagues at his day-job at a hotel kitchen in Terrigal went on to work at Sydney's Icebergs and showed some of the bread to chef Karen Martini, and that was the foot in the door that has since led to Sonoma being one of Sydney's biggest players both in restaurants and retail.

Bourke Street Bakery, though a rough contemporary of Sonoma in the Sydney scene, has a distinctly different agenda. Talking to Dave McGuinness and Paul Allam, the founding business partners who have come to focus on pastry and bread, respectively, they seem almost bemused by the success of their venture. "We wanted to start a bakery/café where we could do everything ourselves," says McGuinness, the mixer and the oven being the only mechanical intervention in their breadmaking. "That niche wasn't really being filled, but we didn't have lofty aspirations, we're just two guys who wanted to produce good bread and do some decent pastry."

The pair started baking at their tiny Bourke Street, Surry Hills, bakery in July 2004, says Allam, with McGuinness and he baking, his girlfriend out the front and friend Daniel on the coffee machine. "And by the end of the week we had to put on three more people. And that was before we did salads or sandwiches." By the following September they had opened another branch, also named Bourke Street Bakery, despite its Broadway location, and then demand became such that the additional larger premises they opened on Gardeners Road, Alexandria was needed pretty much just to keep the two shops in sourdough. Yeasted doughs are done in each bakery, and while the pastries are made centrally, they're baked on the premises. "We're very much conscious that we don't want to lose the baking feeling in the shops." With feel being their guiding consideration, wholesaling and restaurants have never been part of their game-plan. "Because we're not wholesaling," McGuinness says, "we have the ability to do whatever takes our fancy - we don't have to meet someone else's requirements."

Uncompromising seems to be Daniel Chirico's middle name, yet the fruits of his bakery appear proudly in Melbourne's best restaurants. Baker D. Chirico, opened in St Kilda in 2001, is the bakery you'll hear mentioned most often in any discussion about Australian artisan baking, and Chirico is one of its most eloquent proponents. Having baked on and off for years at Carlton's Natural Tucker, one of Melbourne's original wholefood bakeries, and at Brunswick Street's perpetually hip Babka, he had also studied and maintained

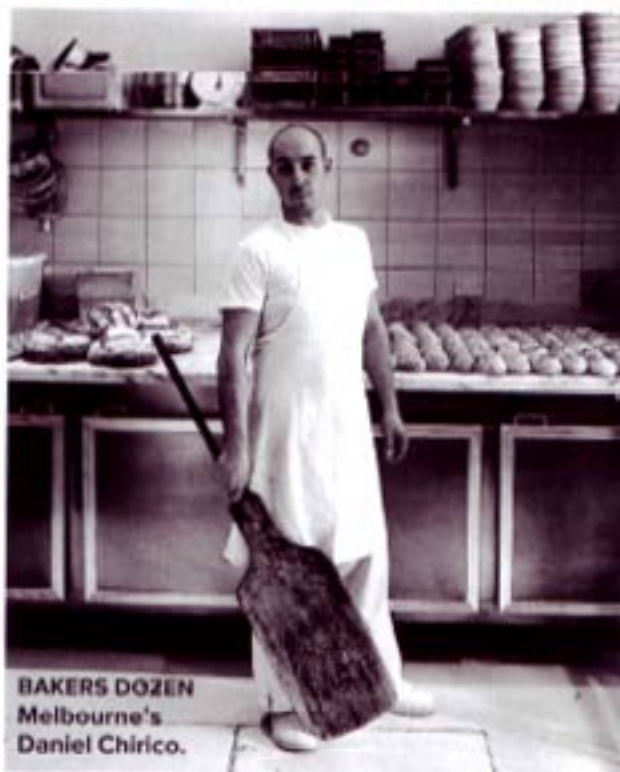


**A TALE OF TWO LOAVES**  
Sonoma's soy and linseed bread and baker Andrew Connole (left).

something of an interest in graphic he was determined not only to make excellent bread, but to package and present it in a new and attractive way. Organic, in Chirico's book, is fine, but he wanted to break free of the associations good bread had with hippies and health food. He's also a pretty hardcore dude, and makes no apologies for the dedication his craft requires. "Breadmaking absorbs you totally, especially when you're dealing with natural-fermented bread. It has a life of its own, and you're creating something from a living material. That's quite spectacular to watch evolve. The baking hours, yeah, they're tough, but it's all part of the parcel. It also has something a bit romantic about it."

Artisan bread can be made on mass scale, Chirico says, but until we have a pool of enough skilled labour to bake thousands of loaves by hand, bigger baking in Australia usually means compromised quality. "Until we get to that point, I think what you're going to see is a lot more little bakeries turning up and just suppling their local area. Which is good."

Tony Dench opened Dench Bakers in early 2005. He'd spent three-plus years working closely with Daniel Chirico beforehand, but had also baked on and off since his late teens, including stints at Natural Tucker. He opened Dench, he says, because he wanted to be his own boss and bake his own bread for his own customers. "I think people are turning back to what it was that made food and society and communities great," says Dench. If that sounds a bit grandiose just for bread, he sets it in the context of a culture moving away from chain stores, away from large shopping



**BAKERS DOZEN**  
Melbourne's Daniel Chirico.

#### MELBOURNE

**Babka**, 358 Brunswick St, Fitzroy.  
**Baker D. Chirico**, 149 Fitzroy St, St Kilda, (03) 9534 3777.

**Dench**, 109 Scotchmer St, North Fitzroy, (03) 9486 3554.

**Knead**, 396 Burwood Rd, Hawthorn, (03) 9819 5883.

**Phillippa's**, 1030 High St, Armadale, (03) 9576 2020.

**Wildflour**, 422 George St, Fitzroy, (03) 9419 1391.

#### SYDNEY

**Bourke Street Bakery**, 633 Bourke St, Surry Hills, (02) 9699 1011.

**Brasserie Bread**, 1737 Botany Rd, Banksmeadow, (02) 9666 6845.

**Sonoma Baking Company**, 24/198 Young St, Waterloo, (02) 9690 2060.

areas. "Those places are still doing big business," he says, "but there are people who don't want to buy white sliced bread, who don't want to take part in big shopping at faceless companies - they want something different and they want something personal. Bread's a part of that."

We've had waves of good baking before, Chirico is quick to point out. Maybe this time around it'll stick. Good bread has lost its earnest associations, and is now a prerequisite if not a lust object in itself, and the honourable tradition of baking by hand is finding fresh interest.

"We had a gathering of artisan bakers the other day," says Tony Dench. "There were lots of young, keen faces there, and one of the older members remarked that their father made bread in a similar fashion to what we are coming back to. We have a longstanding tradition in Australia that has survived. It seems to me that it's getting stronger. I hope it does." \*