

IN THE KITCHEN

RISING TO MEET THE DAY WITH CON PANE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CANDICE WOO



I make my way through the still-dark streets, rubbing the sleep from my eyes; it is the wrong side of 3 a.m. and instead of heading to bed, I am on my way to Con Pane Rustic Breads & Café for the morning shift. Catherine Perez, Con Pane's owner, greets me with the considerate offer of coffee and brings me a beautiful, brimming cup made with beans from a local roaster, North Park's Caffé Calabria.

As we sip, Catherine tells me the story of the bakery, of coming to a crossroads more than a decade ago, frustrated by her corporate job in finance. She wanted to open her own business, though she wasn't sure that it would be food-related. But she had been seeking out healthier, whole grain breads for herself and discovered that Southern California's artisan bread bakers were relatively few, save for Nancy Silverton at Los Angeles' La Brea Bakery and Bread & Cie's Charles Kaufman.

So in the late '90s, Perez enrolled in a six-week program at the National Baking Center, held at the Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis. Founded by the Bread Bakers Guild of America, the professional course taught traditional baking as well as artisan bread baking techniques, a curriculum designed by Didier Rosada, a French master baker with a reputation for both his precise craft and artistic skills with bread.

Catherine is a Midwest native who's lived in San Diego since college, and during those college years she'd gone on a bike ride through

Point Loma and thought that the pleasant, coastal community seemed like a place with potential. She found a spot for the bakery on a quieter southern stretch of Rosecrans Street, in a former bank building of all places, ironic considering her previous profession. It took a few years for the area to catch on, food-wise, but it now boasts a number of good, locally minded eating destinations: the Pearl, Roseville and Liberty Station's Tender Greens, all of which prominently feature Con Pane's bread on their menus.

With the help of her best friend and general manager, she lovingly constructed her dream bakery, with a hand in everything from the design to the bakery's logo and T-shirts, whose backs are printed with these words to live by: Eat More Bread. Though she no longer bakes during the early shift at the bakery, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this June, Catherine is still there every day, developing all the new bread and pastry recipes and helping her six experienced bakers, who work and bake throughout the day.

The morning's skilled baker is Juan Palacios, whose limbs are in constant motion as he moves between the flour-dusted tables, where he shapes the loaves, and their massive multi-deck French oven, which was shipped over in pieces and took a week to assemble. I help him shape a few demi-baguettes, one of Con Pane's French-style baguettes that are so popular that they often sell out before the day is

PAIN SUR POOLISH

Adapted from The Village Baker: Classic Regional Breads from Europe and America

Catherine has a fondness for The Village Baker: Classic Regional Breads from Europe and America, *one of the first books she purchased when she was contemplating her own bakery. It inspired her to start experimenting with the natural starters that she uses in the bakery today. Though the sourdough starter requires maintenance and attention that may be too much a home baker, a poolish is a hassle-free way to allow additional flavor to develop before the bread dough is mixed, improving the taste, texture and crust of the final loaf.*

The Poolish:

- 2 teaspoons active dry yeast
- 1 cup filtered water
- 1 cup unbleached white flour (all-purpose flour)

Add the flour to a bowl, stir in the yeast for even distribution, then pour in the water. Stir with your hands to make sure there are no small balls of flour left in the poolish. Cover the bowl with a lid, a towel or plastic film and let rise in on the counter. The poolish will be ready when the top is covered in bubbles, approximately 3 to 5 hours later.

The Dough:

- 2 cups unbleached white flour (all-purpose flour)
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon active dry yeast
- ½ cup water



In the bowl of a mixer with a spiral attachment, add the flour, salt and yeast. Stir to combine. Add all of the poolish and the water. Mix on low speed for about 4 minutes to incorporate the ingredients. Switch to a medium speed and mix for another 5 minutes. The dough should come together in a ball and be moist, but not sticky. Remove the dough from the mixer, place in a bowl that's been lightly coated with olive oil and cover with a towel. Allow the dough to rise for 2 hours. Divide the dough into two pieces, and then shape each piece into a round. Cover the loaves with a towel and let rise another 1 to 1½ hours. The loaves will be ready to bake when the dough slowly springs back when pressed with a finger.

While the dough rises, preheat the oven to 450° with a baking stone set on the bottom deck of the oven. If you do not own a pizza stone, the loaves can be baked on a cookie tray. Place the risen loaf on a cornmeal-dusted peel or cookie tray. Make two vertical cuts in the top of each loaf using a razor blade or a serrated knife. Prior to placing the loaf in the oven, use a spray bottle filled with filtered water to spray the top and sides of the oven to create steam, then put in the loaf. Spray the top and sides of the loaf before you close the oven door. Bake the loaves for approximately 30 to 45 minutes or until the crust is at your desired shade. Allow the loaves to cool before slicing.

through. The dough is gently folded back onto itself until it forms a neat cylinder with tapered ends. We pinch the seams closed to keep the loaves whole and slash shallow cuts into their tops so that they open up cleanly in the oven. Catherine tells me that I'm not doing it wrong, but there is definitely an art in artisan baking that I may not have the capacity for.

Juan periodically checks on each batch of bread in the oven; though he uses a timer, he mostly relies on his experienced baker's eyes and nose to tell him when each is done. Burnished brown loaves emerge from the steamy heat and are transferred to racks to cool.

Con Pane's breads start slow and require patience. Instead of adding yeast directly to dough made from high-gluten flour, the bakery

uses regular all-purpose flour and begins with a pre-ferment, a fermentation starter that gives a boost in flavor and structure to the final dough before it gets kneaded and baked.

They use a poolish, or sponge, to enhance their baguettes, ciabatta and focaccia and a levain, or sourdough starter, for many of their other breads, including the brioche and challah. A natural growth environment for the development of yeast and cultures that leaven and add that unmistakable tang to sourdough breads, sourdough starter needs careful tending and multiple daily feedings of flour and water to stay viable and living. Con Pane's sourdough starter is over 10 years old, dating back to Catherine's time spent baking in Minneapolis and made local from the wild yeast in the San Diego air.

After the pre-ferments are mixed into the final dough, it is then cold-proofed for 18 hours, which strengthens the gluten and allows time for the enzymes in the flour to break down the starch molecules into sugars and proteins, bringing out a sweeter, complex flavor and creating a better-textured crust.

Among the roster of their daily handcrafted breads are the Point Loma Sourdough, Kalamata Olive, and Artisan Multigrain, filled with flax seeds, whole oats and sunflower and sesame seeds. Sturdy slices sandwich lunchtime specials, including a Turkey Cobb and the Almost Grilled Cheese, melted Gorgonzola and triple-cream Brie between oven-toasted slices of Rosemary Olive Oil bread. And regulars know which day to drop in for their weekly specialty breads: Cranberry Orange Walnut on Tuesdays, Gruyere and Chive on Thursdays and plain and sesame Challah every Friday. Weekends feature Con Pane's decadent Pane Cioccolata, a sweet loaf that straddles the line between bread and dessert, made with cocoa powder, vanilla, wild honey and studded with pockets of creamy milk chocolate.

A bread sampler platter, called the Bread Baker's Plate, is a great way to sample the different varieties. They come in both sweet and savory lineups and include three thick slices of homemade bread. The savory plate comes with butter, cream cheese and berry jam or homemade pear butter. Con Pane's buttery brioche dough is used to bake their justly famous cinnamon rolls, tender spirals swirled around spice and raisins, and figure 8-shaped twists filled with roasted hazelnuts and Belgian chocolate. They fill the air with their sweet scent as they await a homemade cream cheese glaze or dusting of powdered sugar.

The bakery and café has become a meeting hall for locals who come in for their daily bread or to meet for lunch. Catherine herself now calls the area home and spends holidays with friends she's made through the bakery. In this tough economy, she's seen her numbers rise, perhaps because eaters are more thoughtfully

spending their money on artisan foods and support their local community. The bakery is a friendly place, where everyone is welcomed warmly and regulars are greeted by name. And though many of the breads sell out daily, if there are any leftover at the end of the night they are donated to a local charity.

Outside the glass doors of the bakery, the dark streets have brightened. The city has begun to wake, but it's time for me to get back to bed. The seeded demi-baguettes that we baked are out of the oven and have already been nestled in canvas-lined baskets, ready for the morning's customers, who will start streaming in by 7 a.m. I take home a freshly glazed cinnamon roll, a loaf of multigrain bread for sandwiches and one of the seeded baguettes. We have hard time picking out the baguettes that I'd shaped, which I suppose is a good thing.

Candice Woo is a freelance food writer in San Diego. She is currently the food columnist for San Diego CityBeat, where she writes a weekly restaurant review and food news section. Candice is a frequent contributor to Edible San Diego and also works as the Education and Community Chair on the board of Slow Food Urban San Diego, a chapter of the non-profit organization Slow Food International. To talk food, email Candice at candicew@gmail.com.



MORE OF CATHERINE'S TIPS FOR HOME BAKERS

- Try SAF Red Label instant yeast, which can be found at Whole Foods Markets.
- Always use filtered water, not distilled water.
- Replace some of the water in a dough recipe with milk or buttermilk for change in flavor and texture.
- Replace half the quantity of white flour in a recipe with whole-wheat flour for heartier, healthier bread.
- Add half a cup of dried fruit, nuts, grains or herbs to fully mixed dough for variety.
- Invest in a baking stone. Stones of all prices can be found at Great News Cookware.
- When you bake, use a spray bottle to create steam for a fuller loaf and glossier crust.

