

Celine fires chewy batardes on Main Street

by Justin Nobel

Streets are empty and shops are shut at 3 a.m. in Point Reyes Station but the light in a small clapboard house on the corner of 4th and Main rarely goes out. Last Saturday, smoke curled above the roof and reggae music and the smell of singed flour wafted from a window. Inside, Celine Underwood was baking sourdough bread in a wood-fired brick oven.

"Since I was a teenager, whenever I went somewhere new I would go down a list of bakeries and make it a point to visit each one," said Celine, who grew up in West Marin.

Seven years ago she opened Brickmaiden Breads and began baking her own loaves. Most bread is produced from prepackaged mixes in commercial ovens but Celine uses her own starter and bakes in one of the county's few brick ovens. Hers is the only one owned and operated by a woman.

Shaping

Brickmaiden bread is baked in a small cabin in Celine's front yard. Sacks of flour stand by the door and footprints etched in flour decorate a hardwood floor. Wood racks on the far wall are lined with loaves: baguettes in center, batardes on the side. Caged light bulbs bathe the room in a pale orange glow.

Baking Brickmaiden bread is a nearly 24-hour long process. Last Saturday, Celine rose at 1 a.m. and put on a camouflaged cap, a dust mask and a pair of floury clogs. An apron covered a pink T shirt and her jeans

were rolled at the shins. With a flick of the wrist she sprinkled bran and flour then slashed loaf tops with a thin razor called a lamb. The cuts release heat and serve as signatures for bakers. She transferred loaves to the oven with a long wood tray called a peel. Baking takes about 20 minutes but loaves must be rotated after five or ten. Bread against the wall will burn and thinner baguettes need less heat.

The oven weighs 30,000 pounds and was built in Marshall by an apprentice of Alan Scott, a master brick oven builder from Tasmania. It is eight feet deep, six feet wide and holds 60 loaves of bread. The oven is lined with large bricks called pavers and insulated with a mixture of cement and vermiculite, a mineral that expands when heated. Last winter a truck hauled it to Point Reyes where a crane lifted it into place.

Wood to fire the oven comes from almond trees. Firing starts at nine the morning before the bake and wood is added throughout the day. During this time dough is mixed, shaped and set between ripples on rough mats called couches. The cold pale loaves are placed in the fridge where they will slowly rise for eight hours. Oven temperatures peak in the afternoon around 900°F. By 2 a.m. they have dropped below 600 and baking begins.

Wood-fired brick ovens are touted for being able to hold more moisture in the dough than convection ovens, which are ideal for pastries, or rack ovens, which are fired by gas. Brick oven crust is golden and thick and chewy and the inside is moist and spongy.

"This oven has a beautiful way of caramelizing dough," said Celine. "The stones get saturated and a deep heat springs up and makes the loaves lofty."

Preshaping

Celine was born in Orange County and spent her late teens on the S-2 ranch in Marshall. Oven builder Alan Scott lived above her and Celine often sat in while he baked *desem* bread, a dense oval loaf.

"I remember getting it and going, 'Mom, what is this?'" said Celine. "It sparked an interest."

After graduating Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, where she lived next to a bakery, she baked bread at the Bovine Bakery in Point Reyes Station then traveled the French countryside for a year.

"All I ate was baguettes with jam or goat cheese," said Celine.

Charmed by the bread, she presented bakers with a translated note saying that she was interested in learning how to bake bread and willing to work for free. No one hired her but she returned to Point Reyes motivated to start her own bakery.

In 2000, a space downtown became available and Celine seized the opportunity with financial support from Bovine owner Bridget Devlin.

Today Brickmaiden bread is sold at stores in Stinson and Inverness Park. Customers at Toby's line up to wait for Brickmaiden scones. The Marshall general store sells

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Brickmaiden bread is baked in a small cabin in Celine's front yard. Last Saturday, Celine rose at 1 a.m. to start the bake. She put on a camouflaged cap, a dust mask and a pair of floury clogs. She didn't get off until 4 p.m. Photo by Justin Nobel.

>> Celine

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focaccia and the Bovine sells Brickmaiden croutons and granola.

"Whatever she touches is gold," said Bridget.

Behind the bakery is Celine's home, a 1914 ranch house with tall windows and slanted ceilings. She lives with her husband Ido, who grew up in Point Reyes, and their towheaded two-year-old, Naima.

"She's not really into bread unless it's mine or a peanut butter sandwich," said Celine.

Ingredients

The base of sourdough bread is a starter, a mixture of flour and water that draws yeast and bacteria from the air. Starters change with their surroundings: deserts are too dry to produce good ones but San Francisco, where it's often cool and damp, is known as a sourdough hotspot. After several days starters begin to bubble and stink as sugars are digested by bacteria. A starter must be regularly *fed* with flour and water.

"It's like having a baby," said Celine, who feeds her starter three times a day.

Celine buys flour from a family owned company in south San Francisco and gets a grey sea salt called Sal de Guendre from the coast of France. Customers sometimes complain about biting into flecks of seaweed and

shell fragments. Every four months Celine receives 220 pounds of salt at a cost of about \$1,000. Flour is shipped twice a month.

The hardest ingredient to keep in stock is good bakers. Celine had numerous applicants for a position open this summer but no one she trained has stuck around.

"A lot were people with a romantic vision," said Celine. "Others thought they were working in a kitchen. With some I worried about stamina. It just wears on your body."

Baking is like playing a game of basketball for a week straight, said Matt Kreutz, one of two other full-time Brickmaiden bakers. "People who like it love it and people who don't don't. If you don't like it you're not gonna last long."

Matt is tall and friendly with a shaved

head, a bushy goatee and arms inked with tattoos. "[Baking bread] takes a lot of moxie," he said. "You're really putting yourself out there and that's fun and exciting and a little scary."

For Brickmaiden bakers "putting yourself out there" means carting loaves to local merchants who will sell them to customers throughout the day. Just before dawn last Saturday, Celine loaded five bags of bread into a red wagon and stepped into an eerie mist. Streets were still empty and streetlights glowed in the fog.

"I don't particularly like getting up this early," Celine had mentioned earlier, "but there's nothing like the hours of the day when no one else is around and seeing the day open."