French Bread Baking: A Dying Art

For one thing, the antique brick oven, built approximately 60 years ago by specialists from New Orleans, cooks the bread slowly. It gives the crust a different texture and a different flavor to the bread, he said.

"Good, old time Acadian French bread takes about nine hours to make," Grafton said. He admitted that even he takes some shortcuts in baking the bread. Now, instead of letting the dough rise naturally until he married into the Danna bakery family 25 years ago, he had never even seen the inside of a bakery.

Once his bread is baked, Grafton delivers it along with cakes, donuts, pastries and cookies to three outlets he supplies. Then it's home to sleep a couple of hours and back to work at 6:30 a.m.

While Grafton and his stepson, Camille Danna, claim they don't notice anymore the warm, honey smells coming from their bakery, a newcomer in the early morning hours is assailed by the wonderful smells of fresh dough, sweet cakes, baking bread and fresh donuts. Even the back room full of flour, chocolate and other bakery items, smells good.

Years ago, housewives mixed their bread dough, let it rise outside, then baked it in their own brick ovens once a week, Grafton said. The tradition remains that people buy most of their bread and pastries after Church on Sunday, so Saturdays and early Sunday mornings are busy times.

Grafton said he is considering getting out of the bakery business soon. It is hard work, he said, and he's not young anymore.

"In 1969 I had a stroke and had to learn how to walk again," he said. "I was paralyzed on my right side. It took me a while to get myself at the bakery than the therapist could do."

Once the bread dough is started, there is no stopping. "Grafton said. Everything must be done at the correct time for the bread to be good."

Grafton and Danna grab soft round loaves and heat them on the floured wooden table, fold them over, beat them again and roll them into long, thin leaves.

The loaves are put on long handled wooden paddles and shoved back into the deep brick oven. The oven door is left open and you can see the bread swell and turn brown. In 35 minutes the loaves are baked, then slipped into paper bags and carried to the front just in time for the first sleepy customer of the day.

Once the bread is baked, the oven is shut off. However, it cools slowly and is used throughout the day to bake cookies, pastry shells and other delicacies.

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