would you see him in his bakery, while you're shopping at Poupart's. The first thing that strikes you about Francois Poupart is his two small gold earrings—once on each ear. It seems strange to see a man of a certain age, as they say in France.

But Poupart, a 65-year-old French-born baker, isn't making a fashion statement. The earrings symbolize his status as a master baker in the French pastry system, as old as medieval times, known as compagnons. These are French craftsmen or skilled artisans renowned for their abilities in more than 30 trades that include confectionery, masonry, shoemaking, painting, plastering, leather work, automobile mechanics and pastry making, which is Poupart's work.

The earnings acknowledge that an apprentice has become a master and been named in a very short time by a very proficient for life. "It was so not because if you saw someone look at you and any time on the train or something, they'd say, 'Oh, Compagnon!'" Poupart. Of course, they still do, and with everything wearing earrings, it's not quite the same.

This year it's Poupart's 20th working as a chef and baker in Lafayette. He had always loved the United States, so after apprenticing at some 35 bakeries in France to learn different ways to make breads and pastries, he was now a compagnon, just accompanying story and had his heart set on moving here.

Through their compagnons contacts, Poupart landed a job in 1982 as chef for Restaurant Nouvelles, (now Chas Pasture), the first French restaurant in Lafayette. Poupart's wife, Louise, came with him. In those days pastries were in demand. You could get one just like that. And the fact that neither Francois nor Louise spoke a word of English was no problem either, since about 80 percent of the Lafayette population spoke French back then.

"When my wife and I opened the bakery in 1985, sometimes we'd have to ask for someone who spoke English to come over and speak English to the customers," recalls Poupart. "But it was fun at the time."

Today Poupart's bakery is unquestionably one of the top bakeries in Louisiana, and it has a national reputation for its French breads and pastries. In addition to its being Lafayette's hometown, Poupart's stays more than 800 miles of bread to 16 locations in Baton Rouge and about half that amount in Lake Charles on a weekly basis. Each location is run by a Poupart's employee as a manager under the guidance of Poupart's every work. And on any given day orders come in from as far as Alaska. The bakery, which now has 35 employees, has been enlarged twice, most recently last year, and there is no more space left for expansion.

But Poupart will remember when he first opened his bakery on Pinhook Street at a location close to where his bakery is now. He and Louise started with $50 in the cash register.

"When we first started, every day I'd buy three bags of flour," remembers Poupart. "And I'd say for that, as the rest [we'd make that day] was going. We were selling French bread for 12 cents a loaf wholesale. I didn't have any equipment. I didn't have anything. I was making everything by hand. But you know, with three sacks of flour—200 pounds of dough—you can make some bread.

Poupart's business was originally strictly wholesaling bread to grocery stores. Poupart worked 16-hour days six days a week. "We had a little station wagon," says Poupart. "I was cooking bread out of a station wagon, and she'd deliver it."

These days life is a little less hectic. There are new employees to take the 12-hour baking shifts for him. But Poupart isn't tuned off that much for someone who has acquired his own delivery trucks and as able to take weeks off for vacations to Texas and Florida in his mobile home under "Summer Maid."
Learning In The French System

In the United States, there is no such thing as a master baker. There are just good or excellent bakers. The French system is different. Unlike their counterparts in the United States who can pick up a new skill after a year or two in a trade school, a Frenchman's longevity in apprenticeship is generally eight to 10 years. For the first three years the apprentice is generally paid. In order to learn different techniques in the various regions of France, an apprentice makes a "tour de France," moving from one maison de compagnonnage to another in different cities for a year. Masters are often government-funded training houses with workshops, classrooms, exhibition halls, etc., or sometimes, just bakeries where the apprentices live with their master's family. The years of apprenticeship are followed by a period of observation for the apprentice that can range from one to several years.

One of the main purposes of apprentices in the earlier days was to pass skills along orally among families. That which was not passed on could be lost forever, so the practice was essential for keeping traditional techniques alive. However, when the Industrial Revolution took its toll on the French countryside, the apprentice system lost much of its importance. But since World War II, the compagnonnages societies have been renewed to once again teach both old and new techniques and skills. To choose to be a compagnon in France today is a popular alternative to a secondary education.

The most important aspects of being a compagnon are the quality of work that goes into a product and the pride taken in doing the job well. (They, like most apprentices, are not paid only minimum wage.) An article on compagnons in the Winter 1970 issue of France Magazine points out that even though...

"Compagnons, then and now, believe in the creative potential and remaking effect of work. They feel that the highest form of personal satisfaction ultimately comes from using their skills to produce the best product they were capable of creating. They also valued fellowship among craftsmen, especially those practicing the same trade."
"DO YOU WANT TO BE A MILLIONAIRE AND WORK 24 HOURS A DAY? OR DO YOU WANT TO BE HAPPY?"

—FRANCOIS POUPART

Our family was sitting in the family room. The children were laughing on the couch, and the baby was playing with toys on the floor. The kitchen was filled with the smell of baking, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air.

I asked my father, "Do you want to be a millionaire and work 24 hours a day, or do you want to be happy?"

He looked at me and smiled. "I want to be happy. Money can buy you a lot of things, but it can't buy happiness. Happiness comes from doing what you love, spending time with your loved ones, and being grateful for what you have."

I nodded in agreement. "I want to be happy too. Money is important, but it's not the most important thing. I want to make sure I'm doing something I love and spending time with the people I love."

He kissed me on the cheek. "That's the right attitude. Happiness is more important than money."