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Good Bread in Paris

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The greengrocers' stalls smelt good, milk-bottles were still waiting on doorsteps, and the bakeries were redolent of hot, crusty bread.

Georges Simenon, *Maigret and the old lady* (1950), chap. 5.

New trends in a traditional craft

In Paris, a revival of traditional local breadmaking is in progress. It is pleasing to discover a number of new bakeries, opened in recent years; appetizing places where bread is made on the premises by time-honoured methods. In the 1972 edition of that fine dictionary *Le petit Robert*, the word *miche* is defined as 'a big round loaf of bread, eaten in the country'. That is the historic form of French country bread, generally a large *boule*, shaped like a thick, round cushion, weighing several pounds; but sometimes a loaf up to two yards long and thick as a medium-sized tree trunk. Today, *la miche* has found its place in town.

In these new-old shops, we can find breads made with natural yeasts, of diverse grains, with added nuts, raisins, cheese, chocolate...even, to cope with our troublesome modern allergies, bread made with gluten-free flour. And, of course, the good old *baguette*.¹

There are several theories about the origin of the *baguette*. According to one doubtful story, the engineer Fulgence Bienvenüe, builder of the first *métro* lines in Paris, forbade his workmen to carry knives when on his construction sites, lest

their occasional quarrels became deadly. But the workmen needed knives to cut their *boules* into slices. The bakers, it is said, came up with a solution to this problem: the slender *baguette*, that needs no knife to break it!

A legal explanation seems more probable. A law of 29th March 1919 forbade the employment of bakery workers between ten o'clock in the evening and four in the morning. But traditional bread-making takes time; one has to prepare the dough and let it rise fully, which can take several hours; then, a big *boule* needs an hour or more in the oven. Starting all this at four in the morning would have meant very late breakfasts! A less time-consuming process was needed. Hence the thin, light *baguette*, more quickly made.

Thus the *baguette*, that emblem of France, may have originated in the French concern, ridiculed by free-marketeers, to protect workers from exploitation.

A comparable law had been enacted by the state of New York, the *Bakeshop Act* of 1895, which restricted the working day in bakeries to ten hours. Not enough for hard-grinding master-baker Joseph Lochner, who demanded more of his workers. This led to a case that went all the way to the Supreme Court. And the Court exonerated Lochner, striking down the *Bakeshop Act*, which it described as 'an unreasonable, unnecessary and arbitrary interference with the right and liberty of the individual to contract'. This case, *Lochner v New York* (1905), became a notorious example of the American belief that an individual is entitled to set up any contract whatever with another, even if the contract is unfair to the other party.

But let us quit the dismal science of economics and return to the much more agreeable topic of neotraditionalist bakeries.

Emile et Jules

Emile et Jules (18 rue de la Terrasse, Paris 17th arrondissement), opened in 2014, is something quite out of the ordinary: it is part of a small family business that covers the entire bread-making process from field to shop. It is run by a father and his two sons with a dozen or so employees. The father, Marc Winocour, grows wheat on the family farm near Rambouillet (thirty miles southwest of Paris) and manages the traditional stone-grinding mill. His son Emile is in charge of the breadmaking, while brother Jules looks after sales in the markets and in the shop. Their tasty rustic breads are much appreciated; the firm is growing strongly and a second shop is under consideration.

The bakery uses a yeast based on honey; the fermentation (raising of the dough) is slow. This is very different from industrial breadmaking, where it is common for flour to become bread in barely three hours. The slow process yields tastier breads that keep much longer; it is, of course, more expensive, but it can reduce waste.

The shop in rue de la Terrasse offers around twenty varieties of bread, including the popular *oreiller* (pillow, because of its shape) weighing more than three pounds; but you can buy half a pillow. There are several loaves and baguettes, plus *épis* (literally, ears of wheat); these are short, thin baguettes, flavoured with ginger, nuts, poppy-seeds etc.; plus four kinds of *brioche* and some unforgettable fruit tarts.

Panifica

Towards Montmartre, at 15 avenue Trudaine (Paris 9th), we find another new bakery, *Panifica*. This late-Latin word means a woman who bakes bread, like the Scottish family name *Baxter*, which is a feminine form of *baker*. This shop, also dating from 2014, does not belong to a family of farmers, millers or bakers. On the contrary, it is the creation of a former electronics engineer who became a financial analyst, but grew tired of that lucrative but exhausting job and, at the age of 49, began a new life as a master-baker.

François Brault makes some unusual breads, all with organic flour from a family-owned mill near Nantes. Apart from the whole-wheat bread and the *boule*, these are all based on natural yeast, which provides flavoursome and long-lasting breads and facilitates digestion. *Panifica* also offers a range of naturally gluten-free breads, such as 'Swedish' bread made from buckwheat², potato flour and sunflower seeds. Then there is a 'Norwegian' bread, solid and tasty, made from *spelt*, an old variety of wheat. And a bread made from a rarer grain, *Kamut*, whose name hails from the language of Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs. This hard wheat with very large grains, or Egyptian or Persian origin, is known for its high vitamin and protein content, as well as for its good flavour.

This is a pleasant place with a view of the Sacré Coeur, where one can stop for a coffee accompanied by a good organic *croissant* or a satisfying sandwich.

Chambelland

We continue to the east of Paris, to the *village Popincourt* near the boulevard Richard-Lenoir. Madame Maigret, who lived at number 132 on the boulevard, could have come here to do her shopping. There we find yet another bakery born in 2014: *Chambelland* (14 rue Ternaux, 11th), whose speciality is that all its products

are gluten-free. They are made with flour milled from crops such as Camargue rice or buckwheat. The owners, Thomas Teffri-Chambelland and Nathaniel Doboïn, also own the *Moulin Chambelland* in the French Alps, which mills only organic and gluten-free grains.

Absence of gluten makes bread-making somewhat difficult, because gluten-free dough lacks viscosity (*gluten* is the Latin word for *glue*). So it has to be baked in moulds, which keep it in shape; free-form breads such as *baguettes* are not possible. But gluten-free flours make excellent tasty, crusty breads, as well as deliciously light tarts, cakes and other pastries.

Chambelland, situated in a pleasant little square, is a good place to stop for tea, coffee or a light lunch with sandwiches and dessert.

Liberté

Rather bigger, with three outlets, is *Liberté*, founded by Benoît Castel. A native of Brittany, he learned his trade there and has had a distinguished career, working with the Paris restaurateur Hélène Darroze (4 rue d'Assas, Michelin starred) and with the Costes brothers, who run very smart hotels. Then, in 2013, he realized his dream of a shop where the craft of breadmaking is on display. Customers can watch the bakers at work, preparing the dough, baking it and creating delicious pastries. This is at 39 rue de Vinaigriers (10th), in the now fashionable district of the Canal Saint-Martin.

You can find there *baguettes*, traditional loaves, nutty bread, chocolate bread, tarts, flaky pastries and cheesecakes; and, of course, Breton biscuits. The unusual, very tasty *pain de coin* is made with a special yeast based on quince, and seasoned with salt smoked over alder-wood; a curiosity of Salish, in the Western state of Washington, where they smoke not only fish, but salt too.

A second *Liberté* shop, at 120 rue Ménéilmontant (20th), opened in 2014. And if you prefer to stay in the west end, Benoît Castel has opened a third shop within the main *Galeries Lafayette* store, boulevard Haussmann. Here, too, you can watch the bread being made.

Schou, "best croissant in Paris"

We shall finish our bread-eating tour of Paris in the 16th arrondissement. Here is the rather longer-established bakery of Guillaume Schou (96 rue de la Faisanderie, near the Bois de Boulogne). He is a specialist in original pastry designs who

frequently comes up with something new. Everything is made on the premises with best-quality ingredients. Last June, Monsieur Schou won the second prize for 'best *croissants* in the Ile de France'. This implies that his are the best in Paris, since the first prize went to a baker outside the city, in the southern suburb of Malakoff.

In this little shop, refitted in 2008 in a bright and welcoming contemporary style, you find a great variety of cakes and pastries, as well as delicious, light-textured breads. It's another good example of the vitality of the French art of baking and pastrymaking.

¹The word *baguette* can mean a variety of long, thin objects: a drumstick, a narrow decorative moulding, an orchestral conductor's baton, a 'magic wand' as in traditional fairy-tales and in Harry Potter.

²Buckwheat (*fagopyrum esculentum*, French *sarrasin*), despite its English name, is not related to wheat. It is a broad-leaved plant bearing clusters of white flowers on tall stems. The seeds contain no gluten. It is grown in Brittany and used to make *galettes* (pancakes).
