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RICHARD FRISBIE :: Pavane du Pain

January 08, 2010 03:12 PM EST

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Life-changing events, even bad ones, can be serendipitous. Things happen, even if we don't know whether they're good or not when they do. Sometimes it seems as if life twists and turns and sneaks up while we're distracted by other things. Suddenly the unplanned – heck, even the unimagined – can just happen, and we're on a tangent, off the old path and on a new. When that happens, we have to be ready for it, able to roll with whatever life throws at us. I'm at that place now. I want you to feel my pain.



When I said feel my pain, I was using my nearly non-existent foreign language skills to say feel my bread. (Pain is French for bread! “Pavane du Pain” roughly translates as Bread Dance.) If you are reading this you can see the same word, pain, but, if you were hearing me read this you know my French pronunciation is atrocious. Sorry about that. Trust me, no matter what you hear, both words are spelled p-a-i-n.

Now that I've cleared that up, here's my news. Over New Year's weekend I was invited to bake in the local bakery, [Hudson Valley Dessert Company](#). I love to bake. I figured it would be good as research for an article, or two, and it would keep me from using the Kitchen-aid with dough hook attachment that I got for Christmas. As much as I like bread, pies and cookies, I don't need to eat them! This sounded ideal. I'll have the pleasure of making them, and someone else can wear – I mean - eat them!

So, last Sunday morning I showed up at 7 AM, and under the owner's close scrutiny, I learned the routine

of a baker's day. I took three containers of dough out of the cooler and put them in the proofing oven. While they rose, I was instructed how to make a fresh batch of starter and put it in the cooler to begin the 3 day journey to replace what I'd just removed. Then I took the two day-old batch out of the cooler and used it as a sponge to make dough for the next day's bread. By then, the original three containers of dough were proofed.



One container was for hard rolls. With much help and instruction, I learned how to cut, weigh, roll and shape hard rolls. Three dozen went back into the proofing oven for the final rise. Later, I'd learn how to spread poppy and sesame seeds over some of them, stamp them to create the curved ridges, and bake them in a moist convection oven for 7 minutes. Voila! Hot rolls fresh from the oven for the customers lined up at the door waiting for us to open.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. While they were rising, I helped turn another container of dough into baguettes. As I labored, I wished I'd paid closer attention to the video I saw in France showing how the best bread in Paris was made. Those details are very important! I watched my tutor and followed his lead to make some not-too-shabby loaves. They went into the proofing oven too. That left one container of dough.



Before we got to that, I weighed and measured flour, salt and yeast while nearly a half pound of butter melted in some buttermilk. This was to create the dough for some white bread loaves. After measuring and mixing and proofing, that dough was put into loaf pans that went back into the proofing oven. While it rose, we turned the last container of three-day-old dough into some 2 lb. artisan loaves. When they went into the proofing oven the fully-risen rolls came out.



Do you see the rhythm here? It really was a carefully choreographed dance with the dough and I as partners, circling from cooler, to proofing oven, to work station, to proofing oven and back to the work station, and back again to the proofing oven, each time a bit more refined, our performance honed until the finished product went into the oven. I reveled in the ergonomics of it, the perfection. This dance has been going on every morning, seven days a week, until all the false moves and extra steps were stripped away, and the beauty of the bread making process itself is all you see.

It was amazing! The symmetry was certainly not flawless once my inexperienced feet were introduced into this ancient dance, but it certainly wasn't hopeless, either. I gave a good account of myself and had a great deal of fun doing it. The aromas of proofing yeast, baking breads and pastries, and freshly brewed coffee divinely combined into the perfect smell – Sunday morning breakfast. While some people were in church, I was in heaven!



I'm going back, at the weekday hour of 6AM, to learn the finesse the full-time baker possesses. He'll smooth off the rough edges I still have and drill me in the routine until I have it down pat. Then, and only then, will I graduate to the position of substitute baker. In that lowly capacity I'll be the backup baker for when days off, illness and vacations prevent the more experienced from fulfilling their daily dance. I only hope I can make them proud of their patient tutelage, and, that in the process, I can learn to make bread as well as they do.

Click to see my article on a French bread museum:

[I Met A Man Who Loved His Bread](#)

Richard Frisbie, FOOD Correspondent:

RICHARD FRISBIE is published twice a month to Gather Essentials: Food. It is a food junkie's take on growing, raising, preparing and - above all else - eating food. Together we'll explore the trends, addictions, equipment and regional specialties that make up the sometimes mundane and sometimes sublime cooking and dining experience. You can keep up with my other postings and Gather activity by joining my Gather network -- I look forward to hearing from you.

You can read all of my articles <http://rfrisbie.gather.com/> or find them with those of the other Food Correspondents, plus celebrity

chef content and plenty of other Foodies at <http://foodtalk.gather.com>

BIO - Richard Frisbie writes culinary travel articles, is a columnist for his local newspapers, and is a regular contributor to the many Hudson Valley, Catskill Mountain and other regional New York publications. Online, he writes frequent articles for EDGE publications, GoNomad and Travel Lady, as well as Gather.

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Comments: 36

[Madame Donna C.](#) Jan 8, 2010, 3:23pm EST

How fabulous! What a great experience!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 8, 2010, 3:27pm EST

You really know it - thanks Madame. Today was my second day. I'll work tomorrow, supervised - then Sunday & Monday (the baker's day off) on my own - and then any Sundays & Mondays I'm in the country. This is so exciting!

[Robin Andersen](#) Jan 8, 2010, 4:13pm EST

sounds great!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 8, 2010, 4:49pm EST

It was! Nice to be connected Robin.

[John Terrell](#) Jan 8, 2010, 4:46pm EST

Yes, indeed! It certainly sounds great to me!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 8, 2010, 4:48pm EST

I seem to recognize the fellow in the picture - Hey JT - nice to see you here. Thanks for putting up with me.

[David W.](#) Jan 8, 2010, 5:31pm EST

What a terrific experience. I have had opportunities to Su chef, but never bake. A great story and photo montage.

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 8, 2010, 5:42pm EST

Thanks David - I was a su chef, but never the baker. Once I get the bread down pat, the pastry is next!

[Aniko](#) Jan 8, 2010, 8:24pm EST

That's very cool, though I must say it sounds like a lot of work...

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 9, 2010, 11:46am EST

It is a lot of work, Aniko - but so rewarding! Today I made, 6 baguettes, 6 loaves of rye (3 seeded) 3 loaves of white bread, 36 dinner rolls, 3 artisan loaves and 50 hard rolls - AND - all the the sponges for the same to be done tomorrow. I had fun!

[Aniko](#) Jan 9, 2010, 2:54pm EST

I get tired just reading that. :-)

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 9, 2010, 2:59pm EST

I got up at 4:53 to do it! I'm tired too. I'm playing hookey from work soon and going home to take a nap. The best news - I didn't eat any of the bread!

[Dorine H.](#) Jan 9, 2010, 5:20pm EST

How can not eating any of the bread be good news???

I love a properly made baguette...dipped in EVOO, slathered with unsalted butter and spread with Bovril or Marmite, or Tiptree's bitter orange marmalade... or some good French country pate (no butter needed)... Or enclosing some glorious chorizo de Cantimpalos... with or without slivers of well-aged manchego wrapped in grape leaves and soaked for a year in EVOO... or enclosing some beautiful rings of breaded and fried squid (calamares en gabardina) with lemon slivers... or dipped in the garlic and white wine sauce in which clams or mussels have been simmered...

Surely you deserved a nice crispy end of baguette after such a diligent morning's work!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 10, 2010, 11:42am EST

It was brown rice and coc au vin for dinner - no bread. I browned everything the day before so it could cook long and slow (3 hrs @ 275) Saturday afternoon to create a warm oasis in a frigid white world.

Had I a baguette, I would have loved any one of the treats you mention - YUM!

[Kathryn E.](#) Jan 8, 2010, 9:11pm EST

Wow, a lot of work but such a great article. I love the black french beret instead of chef hats. Have you noticed how most American bakeries like the grocery store or Au bon Pain cannot make a real baguette? Not crispy enough on the outside and so it becomes hard very quickly. We have one store here, an Italian restaurant, actually, mes amies francaises dit a moi makes the very best baguettes.

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 9, 2010, 11:50am EST

we! I'm still working on my baguettes! Probably will be for the rest of my life.

[Dorine H.](#) Jan 8, 2010, 9:33pm EST

A great baguette is ubiquitous in Europe--and so very hard to find in the US. You look ready to make them a little easier to find in one corner of NY. Wish you were here!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 9, 2010, 11:51am EST

I'm still learning to begin to know how to bake properly. But when I get it right Thanks Dorine.

[Linda K.](#) Jan 8, 2010, 10:34pm EST

What a wonderful experience. I also love the berets.

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 9, 2010, 11:52am EST

I didn't know what I looked like until I saw the photos - glad you liked the look!

[Dorine H.](#) Jan 9, 2010, 2:14pm EST

You're really too cute for words!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 9, 2010, 2:27pm EST

you are a HOOT! Thanks

[Elizabeth R.](#) Jan 9, 2010, 5:52am EST

Fantastic experience, Richard. French bread is so wonderful. Thank you for sharing this experience. You will do beautifully.

[Elizabeth R.](#) Jan 9, 2010, 5:52am EST

Great photos!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 9, 2010, 11:53am EST

Thanks Elizabeth for the kind words and the encouragement.

[Elizabeth R.](#) Jan 11, 2010, 6:43am EST

You are very welcome, Richard.

[John Dragun](#) Jan 15, 2010, 2:29pm EST

Wow...great to see you and John there! I passed patisserie, but didn't excel there, to early for me, but what fun, fresh bread...mmm....

Good to see you in a pro kitchen!

Chef John

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 15, 2010, 2:45pm EST

Hey Chef John! Nice to see you here. Hey Everybody - this is Chef John from Windfall Restaurant in Cranberry Lake, NY (Adirondacks) SEE:

[RICHARD FRISBIE :: Destination Dining - Windfall Restaurant](#)

[Digital Diva S.](#) Jan 17, 2010, 8:09am EST

That must have been a grand time and you look so handsome as a French chef!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 17, 2010, 1:38pm EST

Kind of you to say, DDS - it was great fun!

[Gisela S.](#) Jan 18, 2010, 2:14pm EST

Oooohhh...delish..... I just knew something was missing from my lunch...BREAD!

And I must agree Richard, it takes a certain something to pull off wearing a beret - and you sir have that something!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Jan 18, 2010, 4:08pm EST

Thanks Gisela! It would never have occurred to me to wear a beret, but the head must be covered, and this is the bakery's chef uniform, so there I am! Glad you like it.

[Deborah M.](#) Jan 18, 2010, 2:15pm EST

Yummy!

[Mariana T.](#) Jan 20, 2010, 6:28pm EST

First of all before I send you to the moon on my mind's rocket ship - (for showing me all these delicious OMG how can you do this to me treats) - I will say this - you look great! How did you knock off those pounds so quickly? Ok well you were a member of Shedding Light for a week but still you certainly look svelte - enough said - this is so fabulous and I love the pictures - I sped read it and will go at it again but now my mouth is watering - I did make a red bean pie which I may have for dinner instead of my tofu and spinach stir fry - but I have worked in a bakery and I know what they smell like early in the morning! Stop doing this to me - ok don't stop - it's better to look at it and imagine! Salud

[Mariana T.](#) Jan 20, 2010, 6:33pm EST

While some people were in church I was in heaven

I do think that should be the title of your next book dear one. Salud

[Jennifer F.](#) Jan 20, 2010, 6:40pm EST

Yum! Once I took a memorable tour of a bakery in a very small village in Bosnia - I'll never forget the smell. Your pictures are so gorgeous and your description of your tour is making me want to eat croissants.

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