



Have a go!



Left to right:
Ric Allsopp, David Jones, Debbie Carnegie and Darrin Pringle

Ric Allsopp finds out about slow bread – the enjoyable way

can think of no better or more enjoyable way to find out about bread than signing up for one of David Jones' breadmaking courses or, at the very least, trying some of his sourdough bread in the local shops in Dartmouth.

Like many people growing up in the countryside in the 1950s and 1960s I remember our bread being delivered regularly to the door by the local baker, a 'tradition' we have continued as a family living in South Devon over the last 20 years. Good, standard, yeasted bread in two 'colours' – white and brown. Bread remains a staple of our national diet, but the quantities of bread that we eat in the UK have fallen dramatically from just over two loaves per week in 1950 to less than one loaf in 2004, which is well below the European average. Also, since the 1960s,

produced by industrial bakeries (including supermarkets).

This is in extraordinary contrast to Italy, for example, where 90% of bread production is 'craft' produced, and in France it's 68%. It is perhaps no surprise then that words like sourdough, pain au levain, landbrot, or even 'biga' and 'poolish' – words associated with 'craft' or home-baking – are not so commonly heard in a typical British baker's shop.

Travelling broadens the palate as much as the mind, and perhaps our ability to think beyond the familiar is as much connected with what we eat and drink, as with what we see and do.

In my travels in northern, southern and central Europe, one enduring pleasure has been eating all sorts of bread, from boiled bread (not recommended), unleavened flatbread, soda bread, pan rustico, focaccia, rye bread, landbrot, and seeded

bread, but my favourite remains locally baked sourdough bread, or pain au levain, and for years I have been meaning to learn how to make it myself.

The opportunity presented itself in the form of a two-day 'Slow Bread' course with David Jones of Manna from Devon in Kingwear. Nothing, I admit, apart from an appetite to make and eat sourdough bread had prepared me for the delights (and occasional disappointments) of slow breadmaking.

Arriving at 9.30am in the kitchen at the Manna from Devon Cooking School in Fir Mount House with the three other participants, Debbie Carnegie, Darrin Pringle and Gina Carter, it rapidly became clear not only that the techniques of slow breadmaking connected us in an immediate way, through that fundamental activity of preparing, cooking and sharing food, but also that within two days we would be making somewhere in the region of 25 to 30 loaves of slow bread as well as being given a fascinating insight into the history and philosophy of slow breadmaking.

This is not perhaps the best place to go into the details of how to make sourdough bread, especially as any written description of the techniques involved would probably be as inappropriate as my own attempts to knead sourdough into a coherent form; a technique that, in order to not let the dough end up stuck to the table or to one's hands, simply requires a lightness of fingers and time to practice the rhythmic turn, lift, flick and slap.

But what is special about sourdough?

Firstly, slow bread – bread made using a sourdough that is 'started' with natural, wild yeasts – is good for your general health and well-being. Yes, Mother Nature does know best. In addition to its satisfying chewiness, elasticity and unique flavours, it is more easily digested than yeasted breads. Being probiotic (contains live bacteria which are beneficial to humans) and because it is partially fermented it gives a slow release of energy and is thus filling but not bloating. It has a low glycaemic index (low GI) and since it is naturally resistant to bacteria, it keeps remarkably well. The



Kneading instruction

second reason is very much a part of David Jones' slow bread philosophy – frugality. Slow bread is simple, plain and costs little to make, using flour, water, salt, and natural or 'wild' yeasts, and it can be made more or less anywhere, with very little equipment other than what is to hand.

But there is a third reason which appeals to me rather more than sourdough's claims on health and practicality. It's the poetic and unpredictable quality of the 'starter' – the

fermentation of naturally occurring 'wild' yeasts that forms an active sourdough culture (a leaven or 'mother dough') that can be indefinitely passed on from one batch of bread to the next. Today's Boudin sourdough bread was originated from a wild yeast 'mother dough' in San Francisco in 1849 and has been produced continually ever since. And it is not only the rather magical quality of this seeding process, known since leavened breads were discovered at least 3,000 years ago, but the idea that the leaven is



Proving loaves

Food & Drink



Cooking ciabatta in the wood-fired oven

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local; that its flavours and qualities are unique to the environment in which it is first produced. So, in David Jones' case, a truly unique Devon, Kingswear, Fir Mount House kitchen bread.

By the end of the first day, pleasantly tired from mixing and measuring, kneading and proving, and fortified with coffee, lunch and Holly Jones' gorgeous home-made chocolate brownies, we had prepared enough sourdough to fill the ovens in the kitchen. We slashed the tops of our loaves with our individual 'signatures' in the spirit of 'community baking', and had been introduced to the mysteries of

making a 'biga' or 'poolish' – a very wet dough or 'sponge' used to make ciabatta and baguettes, with their typically crisp crust and light, airy and chewy crumb. Having left this overnight to mature, we returned early the next morning to breakfast on our first batch of sourdough loaves – toasted with butter and damson jam. The morning was taken up preparing the ciabatta and baguettes, and, because of my misreading of relative quantities of water and rye flour, enough landbrot to feed a field of farmers. Meanwhile, David prepared the wood-fired oven out in the backyard, and the first crisp, smoky-flavoured and delectable baguettes were added to the variety of shapes, sizes and textures of loaves on the kitchen table in time for a wonderful late Sunday lunch of sourdough breads, salty butter, rilette of pork, beef and pumpkin salad, and wines, prepared by Holly Jones.

Later, on my way back home on the Lower Ferry

from Kingswear to Dartmouth, laden (and filled) with bread and inspiration, I thought that the most memorable aspect of the weekend was not simply the bread itself, and the techniques of making and baking, but the sense of slow breadmaking as an activity that, in a very literal sense, can provide a continuity to that which we call 'home' wherever and with whomever that takes place. □

The next slow bread weekend takes place on 6 and 7 February 2010 at Manna from Devon. 01803 752943, www.mannafromdevon.com

PHOTOS: JANE FITZGERALD



Holly Jones with the results