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Local chef's breads, pastries rise to the top

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THE Need TO Knead

Local Pastry Chef
Zoe Francois Rises to the Top.

BY KELLI BILLSTEIN

PHOTOS BY CELIA DAVIS

Baking artisan bread at home can feel like a fool's errand. To do it, you need laser-like precision, beefcake muscles for kneading and, above all, a surplus of time.

Psst—a little secret: An easy, pseudo-slacker shortcut does exist. And it yields the same artisan awesomeness.

In 2007, Minneapolisans Zoë François (a trained pastry chef) and Jeff Hertzberg (an M.D. with a passion for baking) co-wrote a bestselling cookbook called *Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day*. The book reveals a revolutionary master recipe for bread baking that requires only five minutes of active prep work. With their method, home bakers are able to turn out those enviable crackly-crustéd boules with that gorgeous, soft interior crumb—and they don't have to wake up at 5 a.m. to do it.

The first 5,000 copies of the book sold out within the first two weeks. More copies were printed. And then more. Now, there are more than half a million copies in print. Not bad for two formerly unknown Minnesotan bread lovers.

Five years later, François and Hertzberg (who are not husband and wife, by the way—just passionate bakers) have toured the country promoting the now four books they've published together about fast, effortless and delicious bread making. In October, *The New Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day* was published, featuring new recipes, more how-to step shots, a chapter on gluten-free baking, and new lush, color photos.

THE EARLY YEARS

François, the pastry chef-turned-celebrity-author, had an unconventional childhood growing up on a commune in Vermont. She remembers having a mean sweet tooth back then, and since her mom wasn't much of a baker, little Zoë had to figure out for herself how to bake cookies and whatever else she was craving.

LIGHT WHOLE WHEAT BREAD RECIPE

From *The New Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day: The Discovery That Revolutionizes Home Baking*

3 cups lukewarm water

1 tablespoon granulated yeast

1 to 1 + 1/2 tablespoons Kosher Salt (adjust to suit your taste)

5 1/2 cups all-purpose flour (we tested the recipes with Gold Medal flour)

1 cup whole wheat flour

Mixing the dough:

1. In a 5-quart bowl or lidded food container, dump in the water, yeast and salt.
2. Dump in the flour all at once and stir with a long handled wooden spoon.
3. Stir it until all of the flour is incorporated into the dough, it will be wet, rough dough.
4. Put the lid on the container, but do not snap it shut. You want the gases from the yeast to escape.
5. Allow the dough to sit at room temperature for about 2 hours to rise. **DO NOT PUNCH DOWN THE DOUGH!**
6. The dough can be used right after the initial 2-hour rise, but it is much easier to handle when it is chilled.

Shape and bake the bread:

1. Dust the surface of the dough with flour, just enough to prevent it from sticking to your hands when you reach in to pull a piece out.
2. Cut off a 1-pound (grapefruit-size) piece of dough using kitchen shears and form it into a ball by stretching the surface of the dough around to the bottom.
3. Allow to rest on a pizza peel covered in cornmeal or parchment paper for 40 to 60 minutes.
5. Preheat a baking stone to 450°F on the center rack of the oven, with a metal broiler tray on the bottom.
6. Cut 1/2-inch-deep slashes on the top of the loaf using a serrated knife.
7. Slide the loaf onto the preheated stone and add a cup of hot water to the broiler tray. Bake the bread for 35 minutes or until a deep brown color.
8. Allow the loaf to cool before slicing.

"My mom never baked bread or desserts," François remembers. "She wasn't a very good cook, either. We called her chicken '12-foot chicken' because when the smoke got 12 feet into the living room, we knew dinner was done."

François' love for baking developed gradually over the years. Whenever she was stressed, she'd come home and bake fudgy brownies, feather-light scones and melt-in-your-mouth shortbread.

"I worked a series of jobs and would come home not very happy. And so, I'd bake," François says. "After my husband and I moved to Minneapolis, I was offered a job at a big ad agency downtown, and I was totally stressed about it. My husband remarked that clearly, I did

not want to be doing this with my life. I was good at it, but I'd walk through the skyways thinking, I don't know how I'm going to do this everyday. It did not come naturally to me."

What happened next came quite naturally: François attended the Culinary Institute of America in New York to learn the art of pastry. When she came back, she fell in with a couple of chefs who taught her a thing or two about the professional food world.



LEARNING FROM THE PROS

One of those chefs was Andrew Zimmern. "Andrew Zimmern is completely nuts," François says. "He's fearless and very confident. He's like that in the kitchen, in life, and in his career. And there I was, fresh out of culinary school, terrified."

François' first gig in the professional food world was working as a pastry chef for Zimmern. This was in the mid-1990s, and she remembers eating lunches in Minneapolis with the now-famous food personality. He'd whip out a camera, hold it at arm's length, and start filming himself talking about the meal.

"Andrew taught me to find my voice," François says. "He's very opinionated, and I learned that if I didn't speak up and share my ideas, I wasn't going to enjoy any freedom or creativity in my career."

Then came local rock star chef Steven Brown. At the time François started working for him, he was at The Local (back when it was fine dining). She was given full responsibility for filling the dessert case there.

"Steven didn't hire me for my skill, per se," François says. "He looks for people who have crazy work ethic, who are going to fit into his kitchen family. He taught me to trust my own creative instincts as a pastry chef."

Putting in 60- to 70-hour work weeks at times, François filled that dessert case with coma-inducing, mind-blowing cakes, pastries, and tarts, finally leaving when she became pregnant with her second child.

"They'd tease me so much if I said it, but I think both Andrew and Steven created the pastry chef that I am today," François says. "I was lucky to have those two mentors so early on."

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT

"So much of my career is luck," François says. "It's being in the right place at the right time and meeting amazing people."

The next bit of luckiness came when François met Jeff Hertzberg. The two had little ones in a music class at the MacPhail Center, and while the tikes jammed with rhythm sticks, the two parents would talk bread.

"Jeff told me he had a recipe that he wanted me to try," François says. "I knew that the recipe would make a loaf of bread, but I thought it would taste awful."

After weeks of excuses, François finally tested the recipe, which made a very wet, shaggy dough and required no kneading prior to baking. You'd

simply make the dough and store it in the fridge. When you wanted fresh bread, you pinched off a hunk of the dough, let it rest 20 minutes, then baked it.

"This recipe and method flew in the face of everything I'd learned in pastry school," François says. "It needed tweaking—but it worked! I told Jeff he had to get it in front of people."

Hertzberg said he'd write a book, but only if François co-authored it. And thus began the intensive baking, recipe tweaking, and writing.

"It's like having a second marriage," François says. "We're together a lot, working together all the time. We have to put away our egos for the betterment of the books."

Hertzberg and François filled their refrigerators with 6-quart containers of their Master Recipe bread dough, snipping off bits of it to develop into Crusty White Sandwich Loaves, Ciabatta, and Baguettes. Meeting with satchels full of bread samples and recipe notes, the two would stroll around Lake Harriet or refuel at Quang on Eat Street (which they called their "office"), comparing notes and co-writing the book that gained instant popularity among bakers.

After the book was printed, François and Hertzberg cold-called radio and TV stations across the country, and set up a book tour for themselves to get the word out. They connected with an online community of food bloggers, and they developed a website to field bakers' questions. The response was so positive that they went on to write *Healthy Bread in Five Minutes a Day*, *Artisan Pizza and Flatbread in Five Minutes a Day* and, of course, the new edition of the original *Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day*.

"I always thought I'd just get through the first book then go back to working in restaurants," François says, "I had no idea that this is where my life would end up."

NEW BOOKS, FRESH BREAD

"I think one reason Jeff and I succeeded is because we're from Minnesota," François says. "There's so much enthusiasm for baking here because we're freezing all the time."

She has a point. A warm slice of bread slathered in salted butter tastes better when you've just come in from snow-blowing the driveway or shoveling the walk. François has a few wintry favorites when it comes to baking this time of year. She recommends trying apple and pear coffee cake, almond brioche, German-style Brötchen rolls and sticky caramel buns. When the wind chill plummets into the single digits, this is the stuff you want to rip into with your bare hands.

Recipes for the above-mentioned sweets, rustic boules, flaky pastries, and peasant loaves, as well as fruit preserves, savory soups, and more are all there in the new edition of François' book. They're ideal recipes for a winter weekend spent tucked inside the kitchen—enjoying bread, but not slaving over it. ●