

ENTERPRISE

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Brewing up a vintage loaf of bread

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There is a pair of breadmakers in Salem who get just as excited about the fall Willamette Valley pinot noir crush as the winemakers. But for a very different reason.

Debra Edwards and Steve Perkins, the owners of [Cascade Baking Co.](#), are not winemakers. They're bakers, and they turn out some most interesting breads.

It all started several years ago when the couple moved to Salem from Arizona.

Perkins, a former baker who has a master's degree in psychology and was working in the mental health profession at the time, decided to start experimenting with making some naturally leavened sourdough bread at home.

"Salem is spore heaven," said Perkins, referring to the moist, marine climate that nurtures microbes of all kinds, including yeasts that reside on the skins of grapes. "I went to LifeSource [a Salem natural foods store], got some organic grapes and made up a starter."

About four years later Perkins and Edwards decided to ditch their jobs and open a bakeshop. "There were no good breads around here," Perkins said. "You couldn't buy a good loaf of bread in the valley."

Cascade Baking became a reality when the couple began operations in Salem's old town in a building that first served as a carriage house almost 140 years ago.

The bakery's first offering? A crunchy-crust, chewy-textured bread called Salem Sourdough that was and still is made from that original table grape starter.

While most of the natural yeasts that originally moved from the grapes into the starter have long since departed into tens of thousands of loaves of bread, they have been replaced by airborne cousins that call the bakery home and provide the life force for Salem Sourdough these days.

"That's what's nice about sourdough," Perkins said. "No matter where you make it, it takes on the quality of your area. This is truly Salem sourdough."

But the story does not end with that first offering.

Not long after opening Cascade Baking, Perkins and Edwards had another idea: Why not try making a bread leavened by yeast strains present during the fermentation of Willamette Valley wines?

"I always thought a wine cellar would be a fantastic place to bake bread," Perkins said.

After trying starters made up of the grape residue left over after the making of several varietal wines, including pinot noir -- Oregon's signature wine -- chardonnay and gewürztraminer, the couple decided to go with pinot noir.

The rest is history. The new bread became an instant hit and is now one of the favorites among the 30 different kinds of bread made by Cascade.

"As far as I know, no one else is making a bread like this," said Perkins.

One of Cascade Baking's more ebullient wholesale customers is Tyna Mays-Schey, executive chef at Grand Vines wine bar and deli in downtown Salem.

Schey has been buying pinot noir bread, plus other Cascade varieties for about a year and a half.

"It's got great flavor and really nice texture," Schey said of the pinot noir bread. "When it's [in season] it is so fabulous. You can taste just a hint of pinot and it's got blue cheese in it, the nuts, all of it combined just makes one fabulous artesian bread."

While Schey doesn't normally like blue cheese she says Cascade uses just enough to enhance the pinot noir flavor.

Grand Vines features pinot noir bread mostly at wine tastings held every Friday night, when different wineries are featured. "It's really nice when someone brings in a pinot, which is quite often," Schey said.

The bread is put out the way it comes from the bakery, along with olive oil and balsamic vinegar.

Other Cascade offerings Schey likes for fondue and sandwiches are cheddar bread, flavored with sun-dried tomato and basil and Walla Walla onions, and Salem Sourdough.

Any leftovers, no matter the variety, are cut into bread chips for salads after being dried.

How do you chip a piece of bread? "You cut it very thinly," Schey said.

Schey features only Cascade breads, for the deli and catered tastings.

Unlike Salem Sourdough, Cascade Baking's pinot noir bread is not made all year long. Eventually, toward the end of December, the last loaves come out of the oven as the original starter made from the wine yeasts has all but totally faded and lost its flavor and rich burgundy color.

Cascade Baking buys its white flour, a blend of two hard red spring wheats, from Shepherd's Grain, an alliance of 11 family farms located in Eastern Oregon and Washington and Northern Idaho that practice sustainable agriculture.

"It was a wonderful opportunity to have met these guys and work with them," Perkins said.

Since the Shepherd's Grain growers use limited pesticides and practice socially responsible, no-till farming, their wheat carries a seal from the Food Alliance in Portland.

"I think its [wheat] is better than organic because they are no-till," Perkins said. "They aren't losing a lot of topsoil," said Edwards, who has a doctorate in sociology from Arizona State University.

"We can trace our [white] flour back to the individual farm," Perkins said. "Other bakers can't do this. They don't know who the farmers are, where the flour comes from."

In the near future Shepherd's Grain will be supplying Cascade Baking with whole wheat flour, too, Perkins said.

"Part of our push right now to develop a whole wheat flour is based upon Steve's and Debra's desire to have one," said Karl Kupers, a Shepherd's Grain grower near Davenport, Wash.

The centerpiece of Cascade Baking is an oven hearth that Edwards and Perkins built under the guidance of a master oven builder.

Each morning, around 4:30 a.m., a long natural gas torch is used to spew flame into the interior of the oven for two hours to prepare it for the day's bake. Once heated, the heavily insulated oven stays hot all day.

"Sixteen tons of brick and mortar," Perkins said. "There are very few ovens like this around."

While the types of breads Cascade Baking turns out are called "artisan" in the industry, Perkins and Edwards prefer to be referred to as a community bakery.

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