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Food

RECIPES, NUTRITION AND ENTERTAINING



Dinner Tonight!

Quick Fix: Roasted Chicken Roulade With Sun-Dried Tomato, Spinach and Goat Cheese. **Learning to Cook:** Lentils With Sausages. **The Lighter Side:** Mango Smoothie. **H5**

Faithful to the Core, Past and Present

Apples always brought delight, and once a new set of pots and pans.

By SONOKO SAKAI
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

There are many ways to eat an apple. My centenarian grandmother likes to peel the skin first. Artfully, she guides the paring knife clockwise from top to bottom and produces a red spiral peel so beautiful you want to hang it from the ceiling like a mobile. As a child, I would play with the curly peel and then eat it.

My mother believes apples taste best when baked in pies. She uses whatever pan she can find in the kitchen, sometimes using a large cookie sheet to make a big rectangular pie that's enough to feed an army.

I have been trying to get her recipe, but it changes every time I ask her. She relies on her eyes to measure the ingredients, and, while they may be useful to sort out the good apples from the bad ones, they are not accurate in the way a scale is. Still, I have yet to eat a bad apple pie she has

baked.

When I was a girl, she always baked in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep. Cool temperatures and peace of mind were high on her list of optimum conditions. But such peace was often disrupted when the smell of pies baking in the hot oven would rise to the bedrooms and stir the sleep of her five children. We would come down to the kitchen in our pajamas and munch on the sliced apples as my mother raced to peel more to replace them. If there was any leftover dough, she would let us make roses and leaves to decorate the tops of the pies.

Usually, we would hang out in the kitchen long enough to get a taste of the warm pie before we were sent upstairs. By dawn, the pies would be sitting on the kitchen counter, wrapped in foil, ready to be sent off with my father to work. My father never asked her for them, but every

Please see Apples, H3

Cooking Secrets Of a Recipe Thief

By BARBARA HANSEN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The two women were discussing mushrooms in the produce department at a Chinese market. "Add a little soy sauce and some onion," said one. "Put in ginger root, of course, and be sure to include a dash of sugar." I couldn't wait to try it myself.

We learn new dishes in any number of ways—from cookbooks, friends, publications, TV shows and restaurants. And sometimes even by eavesdropping.

I came across an idea for spinach seasoned with lots of garlic in a Cantonese restaurant in Chinatown. The greens were drenched with a clear sauce that contained an impressive amount of chopped garlic. I could taste no soy sauce, or maybe just a little of the light kind that adds saltiness rather than color. And I detected the

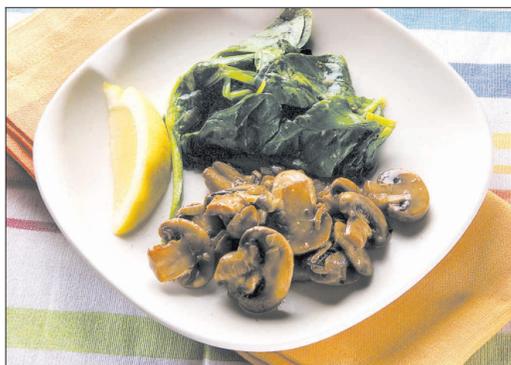
slight perfume of toasted sesame oil.

As with the mushrooms, after a little experimenting I had come up with an easy dish that takes almost no time to prepare, once you've washed and trimmed the spinach.

Some people dislike broccoli, but they've probably never encountered sweet Thai-style broccoli, which appeared as a garnish on a platter at a Thai restaurant in West Los Angeles. When I was curious, a Thai friend explained how to make it. It's better than candy, in my opinion—the bright green vegetable topped with crunchy, golden fried garlic and lightly seasoned with a mixture of fish sauce and sugar.

Braised red cabbage sounds so European—until you taste it cooked Bengali style with an Indian spice called *kala jeera* (black cumin). Debashish Banerji, director of the Sri Auro-

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ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

Soy-Glazed Mushrooms paired with Garlicy Wilted Spinach

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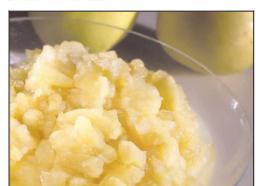
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LUIS SINCO / Los Angeles Times

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"Bite into your baguette and feel immediately the sublime contrast between crunchiness and softness, the crust which cracks between the teeth and the crumb which melts on the tongue. No other food, not even the most sophisticated, can offer such a balanced contrast in consistency."

Jérôme Assire, "The Book of Bread"



Photos by ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times

At Santa Monica's Le Pain du Jour, Karine Commereuc holds an armful of her husband's freshly baked baguettes.

A Head for Bread

Franck-Hervé Commereuc at Le Pain du Jour is fixated on making the perfect baguette. His secret? Make 'em sing.

By TITO MORALES
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Well before the sun rises, in a small kitchen tucked behind a nondescript storefront near one of the busiest intersections in Santa Monica, baker Franck-Hervé Commereuc of Le Pain du Jour can be found patiently trying to create the world's perfect baguette.

"The reason I love baking," Commereuc says, "is because every day is different. You never know how the bread will turn out."

Lean and wiry from his years of wrestling with dough, Commereuc has an energy that is nearly as infectious as his enthusiasm for baking. He moves about his domain with the determination of a chemist trying to uncover a new element and the concentration of a sculptor mulling over a masterpiece in progress.

"You can't hurry," he insists, describing

Please see Bread, H2



Commereuc, right, and Jose Miguel Claros work while a rack of baguettes rises.

Bread: Baguettes That Sing

Continued from H1

ing a process in which each of his baguettes requires a minimum of 20 hours to produce from the first mixing to the time they emerge from the oven. "In that way, it's very much like wine."

Though only 33, Commereuc has been baking bread for more than half his life. After accidentally wandering into a kitchen as a youth in Evreux, a small town about 60 miles north of Paris, he fell in love with the tradition and spent his formative years training at some of the best *boulangeries* throughout France.

"I take a little from this place, a little from there, and a little from there," he says with a smile, reflecting on his more than a dozen apprenticeships. "And, finally," he says, tapping his temple, "I add a lot from here."

However he's managing it, the consensus in L.A. baking circles is that Commereuc is producing some of the finest baguettes around.

"People come into the restaurant just for our bread now," says Lawrence Moore of Chaya Venice restaurant. "Ever since we started carrying Le Pain du Jour, it's become such a dilemma because people are continually trying to buy our loaves [to take home]. We have to turn them down because we won't have enough for our tables."

Producing only 1,000 or so loaves a day, 90% of them baguettes, Le Pain du Jour stands in stark contrast to Southern California's bread-baking stalwart La Brea Bakery, which put the area on the artisan bread-making map in 1989 and has since evolved into a national presence. While Commereuc's operation runs on a staff of five, La Brea Bakery's 400 employees supply more than 700 local restaurants, supermarkets and gourmet shops. Another 4,000 customers nationally and in Mexico enjoy its frozen, partly baked products.

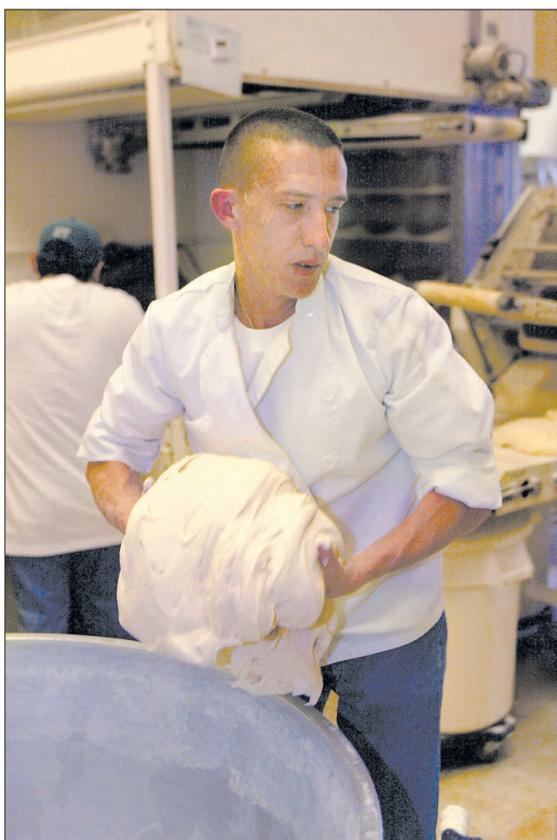
Instead of being intimidated by such opposition, Commereuc is convinced that small bakeries such as his can survive as long as they stay true to their craft and maintain a consistently high level of quality.

"They do appreciate quality here [in Southern California]," he insists. "And there will always be room for it."

The bulk of Le Pain du Jour's business is servicing the tables of such Westside restaurants as Chaya Venice, Café Bizou, Angélique Café and Chaya Brasserie, but Commereuc has recently begun to sell limited quantities directly out of his kitchen to satisfy a growing appetite for his creations.

Popular items include a hearty loaf (his *Trois Saisons*) that bursts with hazelnuts, raisins and walnuts (\$5.75), a bread studded with whole pitted olives (\$5.75) and, of course, baguettes (\$1.75).

When Commereuc speaks about his dough, his tone becomes almost reverential. "It grows," he says. "It learns from me, and I learn from it." He refers to his dough as his "baby" and, like a loving parent, periodically caresses, pats and cuddles his mound of baguettes-to-be.



Commereuc and his baby. "It learns from me, and I learn from it."

Where to Buy Your Daily Baguette

A number of Southland bakeries and restaurants bake and sell baguettes. Here are some of them:

- Belwood Bakery, 11625 Barington Court, Brentwood, (310) 471-6855; 12634 Ventura Blvd., Studio City. (818) 755-8853.
- Bezjian's Bakery, 4715 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. (323) 663-8608.
- Breads 'N Spreads, 23322 Madero, Suite C, Mission Viejo. (949) 472-1389.
- Breadworks Bakery, 2306 Cotner Ave., Los Angeles. (310) 478-7788.
- Brentwood Bread Co., 11640 San Vicente Blvd., Brentwood. (310) 826-9400.
- Buona Forchetta, 3828 Willet, Culver City. (310) 477-2229.
- Chez Nous, 10550 Riverside Drive, Toluca Lake. (818) 760-

- 0288.
- Il Fornaio, many locations.
- La Brea Bakery, 624 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles. (323) 939-6813.
- LA Bread Artisan Bakery, 3119 Los Feliz Blvd. (323) 662-8600.
- Le Pain Quotidien, 9630 S. Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills. (310) 859-1100.
- Massimo's Bread, 13222 W. Washington Blvd., (310) 823-8381; 1029 Abbott Kinney Blvd., Venice. (310) 581-2485.
- Mr. Stox, 1105 E. Katella Ave., Anaheim. (714) 634-2994.
- Röck Bakery, 13455 Maxella Ave., Marina del Rey. (310) 822-8979.
- Zov's Bistro and Bakery Café, 17440 E. 17th St., Tustin. (714) 838-9495.

"It speaks to me. Some days it breathes too hard," he says, imitating a marathoner battling oxygen debt. "That's not good. We want it to . . . [puff, puff, puff] . . . breathe easy. And the baguettes—if you listen, they sing."

As Commereuc carefully mixes flour, water and a little bit of yeast and salt in the large Petrin mixer, which looks like one of Alice's oversized teacups, he describes delicate balances. Not only between the best ingredients but between indoor and outdoor temperatures, oven settings, humidity levels and even ocean breezes. He philosophizes about the texture of the crust, the traditional leaf-like designs that decorate the top with the

edges he refers to as "ears," and the creamy color of the crumb. Most of all, though, what he talks about is patience.

The perfect baguette, says Didier Rosada, an instructor at the National Baking Center in Minneapolis, "is very, very difficult to achieve. You need the right flour, the right mixing technique, the right fermentation and the right oven. In order to do it right you need the right teaching and then a lot of experience."

But there's more to baking great bread than just the science, says Robert Jörin, team leader for the bakery and pastry program at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. "You have to under-



Photos by ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times

Musical loaves: Baguettes come from the oven. As they cool, Commereuc says you can hear them sing.



You can't hurry bread, Commereuc says: "It's very much like wine."

stand the fermentation process between flour and yeast, yes, but then there's much more to it than that."

Commereuc's fervor for bread is infectious. Though his other creations include brioches, *pains de mie* and croissants, it is the baguette and his quest for its perfection that continue to keep him spellbound. "I'm never satisfied," he says.

He's been known to scrap racks of bread even as they're cooling to start the laborious and time-intensive process all over again. "It's not good to give a customer a bad baguette," he says, "because then I lose a customer. They won't come back. It's better I start over."

Commereuc's commitment to quality may have been nurtured in Europe, but even in France, progress has begun to nibble away at once-inflexible standards and conventions. He bemoans the fact that even in his homeland the traditional bread artisans are slowly fading away. Prompted by public outcry, the French government recently introduced legislation to ensure that no bakery that did not make, knead and bake its bread entirely from scratch on the premises could refer to itself as a *boulangerie*.

Freezing the dough is an absolute no-no. Since even the term "baguette" has come under heavy scrutiny of late, labels such as *baguette à l'ancienne* and *baguette de*

tradition have surfaced to enable the customer to distinguish quality breads baked the old-fashioned way from their bland, hastily made counterparts.

Although the baguette seems such a cultural and historical fixture in France, its history can be traced back no further than the 1930s, when the invention of manufactured yeast (as opposed to naturally risen sourdough) and the modernization of oven design created a baking revolution.

Before then, traditional rustic loaves reigned supreme, and their thick crusts and very dense crumb were designed to keep for weeks at a time. "The tastes of the French were changing," explains Rosada. "They began to want a lighter bread with less crumb."

To be sure, the baguette also has its fair share of detractors. One of the most outspoken, esteemed French baker Lionel Poilâne has derided them as "a banal fancy."

"To me they don't have a lot of flavor," confesses bread baker Suzanne Dunaway of Buona Forchetta. "They're just air. But a lot of people like that idea of freshness."

Clearly, the straight-out-of-the-oven characteristic is one of the baguette's biggest allures in France, particularly during the cold months of winter. Baked to be enjoyed within a day, they are a far cry from the large, thick-crust loaves of yesteryear that were designed to

keep for weeks at a time. And, with about 35,000 bakeries scattered throughout the country, it seems that in France there is always a hot baguette within reach.

But their short shelf life may explain why baguettes are not so abundant in Southern California grocery stores and bakeries, and why consumers here seem to prefer more thick-crust, rustic loaves.

Today, some 10 million baguettes are consumed in France on any given day. The tremendous popularity of the baton-shaped loaf originally called *pain de fantaisie* is no doubt due in part to the fact that it can be—and is—eaten not only during each of the three main meals but in between as well.

"The beauty of the baguette is that you can eat it as a whole meal, you can have it as a sandwich or you can have it as an accompaniment," Rosada says. "It's very flexible."

As one of Commereuc's racks emerges from the oven, the aroma becomes overwhelming. And as strange as it may sound, the baguettes do sing as they cool. When you break into one of Commereuc's hot loaves, the thin, crisp crust breaks just so, and the crumb is soft and light, not thick and gummy as in so many preservative-stuffed mass-produced breads.

But still Commereuc keeps striving to improve. While he has had opportunities to expand his business, he regularly turns away new restaurants because he refuses to compromise on the quality of his bread. To tell the truth, his real hope is to downsize one day so he can spend even more time on his dough.

"Maybe in three or four years I get smaller," he says. "Someday I would like a really small wood-burning oven, with a peel (shovel-like wooden tool for removing bread from the oven) and just a little shop in front."

"The secret to making the best baguettes," Commereuc reiterates, just before disappearing back into his kitchen to once again converse with his dough, "is timing."

Le Pain du Jour, 828 Pico Blvd., No. 2, Santa Monica. (310) 399-4870. Monday-Friday 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Saturday 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

For the Record

Incorrect directions - In the Chocolate Truffle Cake that ran as part of the "Top 10 Recipes" (Jan.

2), you need to make 10 ganache balls rather than the five called for. Here is the correct recipe.

Chocolate Truffle Cake

Active Work Time: 25 minutes • Total Preparation Time: 40 minutes plus 1 hour chilling

This recipe from French Laundry chef Thomas Keller's March 7 "Professional Help" column is almost more of a molten-centered chocolate soufflé than a cake. The batter can be prepared up to 1 hour ahead and left at room temperature to be baked at the last minute. Or you can make it even more in advance, freeze it, then pop it straight into the oven. The baking time in that case will increase to 20 minutes.

GANACHE

2 ounces semisweet chocolate
1/4 cup whipping cream

• Grate the chocolate and place it in a bowl. Bring the whipping cream just to a boil and pour it over the chocolate. Slowly stir until smooth. Transfer the mixture into a shallow glass dish and let it cool slightly, about 10 minutes, then place it in the freezer to chill, 1 hour.

• Scoop out 10 balls using a 1/2-teaspoon measuring spoon and shape them so they're round. Chill until ready to use.

CAKE

14 ounces bittersweet chocolate
1 1/4 cups (2 1/2 sticks) butter
1 tablespoon flour

10 egg yolks
7 tablespoons sugar
Nonstick cooking spray
Powdered sugar, for dusting

• Heat the oven to 375 degrees.

• Melt the chocolate and butter in the top of a double boiler set over, but not touching, simmering water. Stir in the flour and remove from the heat to cool slightly.

• Whip the yolks in the bowl of an electric mixer and slowly add the sugar until the whisk leaves a thick ribbon that stays on top of the batter when it is lifted out, about 5 minutes. Pour the chocolate into the yolk-sugar mixture and gently fold them together.

• Spray 10 (1/2-cup) ramekins with cooking spray. Half-fill each with chocolate batter, place 1 ganache ball in the center and then continue filling to the top with more batter. Place the ramekins on a rimmed baking sheet. (The recipe can be made ahead to this point up to 1 hour in advance and stored at room temperature, or 1 week in advance and frozen, tightly covered.)

• Bake the cakes until they begin to pull away from the sides of the ramekins, 13 to 15 minutes. Dust with powdered sugar.

10 servings. Each serving: 530 calories; 248 mg sodium; 287 mg cholesterol; 43 grams fat; 25 grams saturated fat; 38 grams carbohydrates; 5 grams protein; 2.69 grams fiber.

The Great Beef Kebab Quest

Culinary S.O.S.

By CINDY DORN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

DEAR SOS: Many years ago The Times published a recipe for a beef kebab marinade that was the best ever. I was newly married and used it for my first dinner party. It had oil, lemon juice, garlic, soy sauce (I think), maybe parsley, pepper and I don't know what else.

BARBARA TOOHEY
Costa Mesa

DEAR BARBARA: Is this it? This recipe from our archives, improved upon by our Test Kitchen, was the closest to what you described. Maybe a reader has the one you're after.

Send requests to Culinary SOS, Food Section, Los Angeles Times, 202 W. 1st St., Los Angeles, CA 90012 or e-mail to: cindy.dorn@latimes.com. Please include your last name and city of residence for publication.

Beef Kebabs

Active Work Time: 20 minutes • Total Preparation Time: 30 minutes plus 4 hours marinating

2 pounds beef sirloin tip
1/2 cup lemon juice
1 onion, grated
1 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon pepper
1/4 teaspoon curry powder
1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
1 bay leaf

1 clove garlic, crushed
1 (4.5-ounce) jar whole mushrooms
1 (15-ounce) jar whole onions
1 green bell pepper, cut into 16 pieces
16 cherry tomatoes
• Cut the meat into 1 1/2-inch cubes.
• Combine the lemon juice, on-

ion, salt, pepper, curry powder, ginger, Worcestershire, bay leaf and garlic in a shallow dish. Add the meat, toss well to coat, and refrigerate, covered, for 4 hours or longer.

• Heat the broiler or heat an outdoor grill on medium-high heat.
• Thread the beef onto eight (10- to 12-inch) skewers, alternating with the mushrooms, onions, bell pepper and tomatoes. Broil

the kebabs 5 inches from the heat source or grill until the meat reaches desired doneness, 8 to 10 minutes, turning occasionally.

4 to 8 servings. Each of 8 servings: 328 calories; 212 mg sodium; 72 mg cholesterol; 22 grams fat; 9 grams saturated fat; 10 grams carbohydrates; 22 grams protein; 2 grams fiber.



ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times

More is more: Beef Kebabs with mushrooms, peppers, tomatoes and a curry marinade.