

Observations on a San Francisco, California Sourdough Tour
October 11 – 14, 2013
Eric Pallant



For a slide show of San Francisco bakeries, click [Here](#). Click on *Present* in top right corner.

Arizmendi Bakery



<http://arizmendibakery.com/>

- A coop.
- Celebrating their 13th birthday on October 13, 2013 with big hand-made signs celebrating their survival.
- Big banner over their workplace: *Make Loaves, Not War.*
- A woman shows up at the counter wearing a bicycle jersey. The server asks, “Did you ride your bicycle here?”
“Yes,” she says.
“You get a 10% discount, then.”
- It’s Saturday afternoon and they are making pizza before closing for Sunday and Monday, their two days off a week. The baker brushing flour off tables looks like a coop baker. She’s pierced. Tattooed. Butch haircut. Arms like Hercules. Her tee-shirt is black with bold white lettering on the front: *Body by Pastrami.*

- Armizendi's sourdough baguette is very different from Boudin's. It is speckled with a mix of 40% hulled sesame seeds, 40% poppy seeds, and 20% fennel. It's just the right mix of fennel to give a delightful pop every couple of bites. The bread is mild. No place near the powerful bite of Boudin's. Very firm, crisp. The crusts are almost too tough at the ends, but mostly what strikes you is that it isn't killer sour. There are a hundred subtle flavors that yeast bread doesn't have, but it isn't acid-sour like Boudin's. I like that.
- Their sourdough croissants are to die for and I never use that term, "to die for." These croissants have the crispiest crusts of any I've ever had. They crunch almost like phyllo was wrapped around the outside. Yet, like Armizendi's traditional loaves the inside is chewy, almost stretchy. And like their loaf breads, you don't taste sour, but you also know right away you aren't dealing with a white flour, commercial yeast bread with its monotonic flavor and drenched in butter feel. This croissant isn't heavy at all, nor is it greasy or artificially flaky. Instead there is chew with every bite. The flavors are fuller, more multi-toned than yeast based croissants. This I have to try to make.
- On Fridays their specialty is coconut, sourdough croissant.
- Can't forget about their pecan sticky bun. I don't think it was sourdough but OHMYGAWD. Delicately sweet stickiness; not clobber you over the head with corn syrup stickiness. Fresh pecans. Caramel colored from caramelizing sugar, totally naturally. You absorb the aroma before the bun has even entered your mouth.
- It's a happy store with happy employees that own the place. They are hiring and I'm thinking I need to switch jobs and move to San Francisco.

Boudin Bakery



<http://www.boudinbakery.com/>

- Boudin insists that their sourdough can only be made in San Francisco. *Lactobacillus sanfranciscoensis* can only survive in this microclimate, so they say.
- Location is so important that the docent in the museum tells us that for their remote locations they ship out new starter every 28 days. They don't want to take any chances that an imposter could be masquerading as the original Boudin's.

- The Boudin museum is mostly filled with the history of California, the gold rush, and the earthquake of 1906 in which a miracle from heaven, and a fast-thinking employee, saved their precious starter. Among Boudin's many claims to fame is that their sourdough starter dates to the Gold Rush of 1849, making their starter 54 years older than mine. It builds the atmosphere of authenticity into which they fit Mr. Boudin, their legendary founder. More breadth than depth, but that's understandable given their audience.
- The bread, when you eat it, is uniquely theirs. No question about it. You could buy it over the Internet and when it arrived recognize it immediately by its acidic bite. But it is also a little flat. The way a Budweiser is definitely beer, Boudin's bread is undoubtedly sourdough. It prickles your tongue. It's incredibly satisfying as most fresh breads are, but it isn't complex or interesting.
- You can watch Boudin's employees through plate glass windows like you'd find at the zoo. They feed large machines with hundreds of pounds of dough. And calcium propionate, caramel color, salt, dough conditioner, oregano, sage, and other spices. There are sacks containing hundreds of pounds of white sugar. The whole wheat bread they had for sale looked like the winning loaf at the Crawford County Fair. Maybe 15% whole wheat and the rest white flour.
- Boudin's is corporate. They are located in the heart of the SF tourist district. They turn out a product as reliably predictable as a Big Mac. They have a huge gift store for purchasing Boudin's inscribed aprons and cooking mitts and then additional shelving with cooking implements and books and toys for cheeses, meats, chickens, and entertaining. The place buzzes with travelers. There are lines for purchasing sandwiches and bowls of hollowed sourdough bread filled with creamy clam chowder, and lines for buying bread, and lines for buying souvenirs, and a restaurant with a bar on the second floor, and show-and-tell where for \$20 children can make sourdough breads in the shapes of turtles.

October 14, 2013

I canvassed the city with the goal of creating a baguette taste-off. In one day, Sue, Marty, and I visited [Semifreddis](#), [Acme](#), [Firebrand](#), [Tartine](#), and [PanoRama](#). That's a lot of baguettes, not counting the Emmer loaf I purchased from Tartine's (the best of the day), the free rye given us by Tom, the loaf-shaper at Firebrand, and the leftover bits from Boudin and Armizendi. It is easy to summarize what tastes best. Loaves coming from bakeries with the tiniest number of employees using the greatest number of hands, and the fewest number of machines all produced the best tasting breads. Except, of course, that taste is all personal and happily the question of what is best cannot be adjudicated objectively.

Check out some [photos](#) here. Click on *Present* in top right corner.