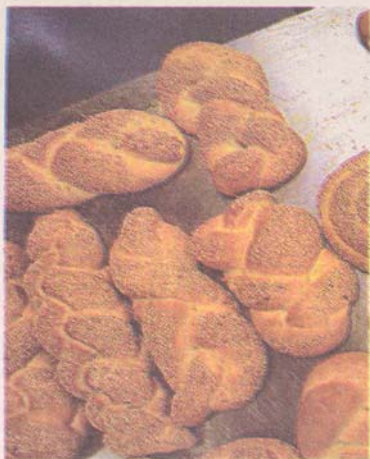


The New York Times

After Roll Call, Baguette Class

Baking School Offers Job Skills in an Old Specialty



By SARAH KERSHAW

Give a man a loaf of bread, and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to bake bread, in, say, a converted pajama factory in Queens, and his prospects will brighten considerably.

That, at least, is the concept behind a school in Long Island City that is teaching the jobless the lost art of making bread by hand in an effort to revive a dying New York City industry.

Eighteen students, covered in flour and sweat, assembled recently on the first floor of the school, the Artisan Baking Center, and spent much of the day scurrying among huge barrels of flour, poppy seeds, brown sugar and oats. The students include New Yorkers moving from welfare to work, ex-convicts, high school dropouts, professional bakers taking refresher courses and the unemployed, all potentially part of a new generation of fancy-bread bakers.

One of the students, Peggy Moore, 49, says she harbored a secret dream of baking bread for a living throughout the 17 years she worked in advertising. Now that she has been laid off from her job producing ads for an agency in Manhattan, Ms. Moore, who loved to bake prune bread and sweet rolls as a child, has joined others to learn dough twisting, baker's math and other basics of the trade at no cost to the students.

"I might as well try something I love," Ms. Moore said. "People respond to it. You come home with boxes of éclairs and cream puffs and bread and people flock to your door. I can't produce forever, but I think I could probably bake for as long I'm standing."

The baking industry, once a thriving piece of the New York City economy that employed thousands of bread, cake, bagel and bialy bakers, has been in sharp decline since the 1970's. Large bakeries have moved their operations elsewhere and automation has replaced bakers with machines. However, the demand for handmade bread has surged in the United States in the last decade, as more Americans choose focaccia or olive sourdough baguettes over factory-made loaves.

With skilled bakers in short supply, the federal Department of Labor identified



New York City as a place in need of a baking school and, in 2000, gave \$1.7 million to help start the first formal baking training program in the city and one of the few such programs in the country.

The organizers of the Queens school, on 37th Street in Long Island City, which opened as a pilot program last year and is expected to train from 400 to 500 prospective bakers a year, are working with New York State officials to grant the school official apprenticeship status. If they succeed, according to the center's director, Rebecca Lurie, the school would become the first bread-baking apprenticeship program in the United States.

So far, the center has placed 27 people in jobs, and employers have begun recruiting directly from the center. To qualify for the program, students must

7 lb. SUGAR
2 lb. ALMOND PASTE
7 lb. SHORT
1/2 qt. EGGS
10 lb. CAKE FLOUR
2 1/2 oz. BAKING SODA
1/2 VANILLA 1 oz. SALT

Photographs by Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

David Bernstein, in the red cap, has the attention of his class at the Artisan Baking Center, where students are learning the lost art of making various breads by hand, following sure-tested formulas from expert bakers.

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REGION

First, Roll Call, and Next, Baguettes, at Baking School in Long Island City



George Gome, a student at the Artisan Baking Center, checked a hot loaf of rye bread during a class last month at the school in Long Island City.

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be able to prove that they have been actively looking for work.

Until now, anyone serious about learning the art of baking artisan, or handmade, bread typically went to Kansas, to the American Institute of Baking, a consultant for the Queens center, or enrolled in an expensive course or two at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

But, as the students in Queens can already surmise, baking is not the easiest line of work. As one of the instructors, David Bernstein, a baker for more than 60 years who trained in Kansas, put it, "You can't have bad feet."

Mr. Bernstein said the decline of the artisan bread industry was driven in part by many bakers' reluctance to give away their recipes for breads and other goods. When their sons and daughters decided not to go into the baking industry, they often closed up shop without passing along their trade secrets, he said.

"The true craftsmen were afraid to teach," Mr. Bernstein said. "But we're bringing back an old tradition."

In 1971, 12,402 people in the five boroughs — the majority in Brooklyn and Queens — were employed by bread and cake bakers, according to the Empire State Development Corporation. In 1997, the last year for which similar data was available, there were 4,555 people employed in the same industry.

However, as more small retail bakeries in New York City have begun selling fancy baked goods, the number of jobs in that niche has increased. In 1986, there were 11,789 jobs in small bakeries, but by 2000, there were 12,414, according to a recent report by the New York Industrial Retention Network, a city-wide economic development group based in Brooklyn.

Many of those workers surely needed on-the-job training. In 2000, the Department of Labor conducted a survey of 15 New York bakeries that reported 73 percent of their workers lacked basic skills.

Supplementing the federal grant with state and local financing, the Queens center was created in a joint effort between the Consortium for Worker Education, an employment training agency that is working with thousands of people left jobless after Sept. 11, and the New York City Central Labor Council. Several industry employers and the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union, Local 3, are collaborating.

In class the other week, Mr. Bernstein led his students — the 18 students were the largest group that has enrolled yet — through a brownie

session and then moved on to making rye, semolina and Italian baguettes.

Mr. Bernstein, 74, said he had baked his way across the country, making bread and other goodies in 40 states, and that when he told his employers he was a baker from Brooklyn, they invariably asked, "Do you know how to make New York cheesecake?"

He does, and it's a specialty. But his students are not yet ready for cheesecake because they are still learning the basics. A basic baking course should make students proficient enough to find jobs in the industry and move from entry-level positions, which pay from \$7 to \$10 an hour, to higher-level jobs, which can pay up to \$18 an hour.

Ms. Moore and her classmates were enrolled in a six-week basic class.

The center, which moves from a

Students show up for the dough, and there's plenty to spread around.

pilot program to a permanent school in the fall, also offers courses on pastry, wedding cakes, holiday baking, pastry and "Baking for Restricted Diets."

The ingredients are measured in quarts, pounds and scoops, instead of cups and teaspoons, and the recipes are called formulas.

After the baking session, Ms. Moore stood with a classmate at the back of the room, comparing notes. She said she had always dreamed of opening a bakery in her neighborhood, the Inwood section of Manhattan, but acknowledged that she was worried that working with such large quantities of the ingredients might lead to disaster.

"I keep having his image of the bread rising and taking over the whole apartment, like a scene from 'I Love Lucy,'" she said.

The baking session was followed by a class lecture in an air-conditioned conference room across the hall, where Mr. Bernstein, who refused to discuss his brownie recipe in front of a reporter, reviewed various bread formulas and tackled the pressing questions of the day. They included how to make sesame seeds stick to dough and how to make sure there is a blueberry in every bite of a blueberry muffin.

Mr. Bernstein looked for a show of hands and said, "Any other questions before we get to the rye bread?"