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No Baking Required To Savor Writer's Bread Odyssey

by: AMY HALLORAN

in: BOOK REVIEWS



1.22.15 - Sam Fromartz's new book, "In Search of the Perfect Loaf, A Home Baker's Odyssey," is a departure. The journalist and editor began his career as a reporter at Reuters, and his previous book, "**Organic, Inc.**," was a standard work of nonfiction about the evolution of the organic food industry. But as his hobby became his subject, the writer leaped into the picture of this book.

"In Search of the Perfect Loaf: A Home Baker's Odyssey"

By Samuel Fromartz, Viking, 2014, 320 pages

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"Baking for me was relief from my daily grind of journalism," Fromartz said in a phone interview. "I really enjoyed the moment in the day when I would leave my keyboard and just bake, shape loaves, bake them. I really didn't want to lose that sense of specialness, of what bread meant in my life. I thought if I mixed it up in my work too much, it would just become part of my job. I really didn't want to do that."



As the recession downsized his income, however, everything became a potential topic. In a single afternoon, he lost most of his steady freelancing gigs. Querying a contact at the travel magazine "**Afar**," he proposed a story about going to Paris to study baguette baking.

The editor said yes, and the adventure began. Consider yourself lucky that his escape became his work, because the result is a really nice journey through baking led by a skilled reporter.

"This book was a lot more personal," said Fromartz. "It wasn't a journalistic investigation. But I am a reporter, so all of those tools I use in my work became tools I used in the book."

love the reading, asking questions and making the dishes in good stories. There are some beautiful descriptions, like the one at **Della Fattoria**, a bakery in Petaluma, California.

“Everyone seemed to be working at a pace just short of a jog,” he writes, setting the stage for each reader to witness, as he did, the bread baking one morning. The baker-writer joins the action, helping shape loaves of bread. But once the actual baking begins, he stands on the sidelines and tells us plainly what he sees. We readers fall into the rhythm of the observed work.

As a small herd of bakers usher hundreds of would-be breads into the oven, Fromartz puts you right there, watching the “dance of the peels,” as loaves go into the oven, and then come out. You are just shy of smelling the bread and tasting it.

The pacing of the stories and information are spot-on. Fromartz takes you through a long baking lesson, **baker by baker**, describing the process and progress. Beginning with baguettes, which were a challenge for him to bake at home, you learn as much or more about the social history of this bread and its place in French culture as you do about the practical route he found to making this loaf.

Yes, there are elaborate recipes, heavy on method, at the end of chapters in case you want to bake along. But no baking is required to enjoy the research he presents as part of his journey. This odyssey is not just for serious home bakers or professionals, but also for anyone mildly curious about wheat.



Samuel Fromartz, author of “In Search of the Perfect Loaf: A Home Baker’s Odyssey.” Credit: Susan Biddle

Guided by his curiosities

“I wanted to understand things for myself,” he said. “A lot of baking books dealt with some of the questions I had, but there was no sort of central resource, and no book that tied together everything from the origins of grains to sourdough microbiology to how to shape a loaf.”

Writing the book really answered his curiosities. His dives into sourdough are deep; at one point he compares cultivating sourdough cultures to farming, and nurturing microlivestock. Holding all this heady material together is the importance of craft, and what he got out of learning a craft at the hands of people who really value bread, its historic framework and its future.

One of the most surprising discoveries he found on his journey was learning about **flour**, specifically locally grown and milled grains. As he started using local grains, and flour that came from small mills, he realized how variable bread’s main ingredient could be.

“It made me realize what’s been lost and sacrificed along the way in that quest for uniformity,” he said. Anything that threatened that uniformity got lost, like grains with different flavors, and non-standard types of gluten or proteins.

“When you’re reading about the Romans and you read about all the different breads they made with barley and spelt, chick pea flour and everything else, all of those breads and grains were lost,” he said. Now, these grains are sometimes used as animal feed. But at one time they were eaten by people and prized.

“My sense is those guys probably knew something about flavor,” he said. “We have this real singular expectation of what bread should be. “Even whole-wheat loaves generally

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estimate that puffy bread ideal. “When you have such a **bakers use local flour** narrow idea of what bread should be, you lose a lot of possibilities.”

Exploring those possibilities through different grains and **flours** engages him as a baker. It’s useful ecologically, too. Pursuing lesser-known grains is good for agricultural diversity and dietary diversity.

When I was reading, I was worried that baking might have lost some charm for the writer. But by the end of the book, he says he’s been able to protect his special connection to baking. I wanted to know how he preserved it. His answer was reassuring, if elliptical.

“I still bake a lot and baking is really a part of me,” he said. “I want to keep that sense of discovery about it. So I think will.”

Main photo: Sam Fromartz’s newest book will have you smelling and tasting the featured breads.

Credit: Sam Fromartz

Zester Daily contributor **Amy Halloran** writes about food and agriculture. An avid baker, particularly of pancakes, she is very interested in the revival of regional grain systems. She blogs at **amyhalloran.com** and **FromScratchClub.com**, and archives her work at **amyhalloran.net**.

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