

AUTHOR, BAKER AND TEACHER: RICHARD MISCOVICH

Fueling the Fire for Bakers of Every Ability

By Amy Hollaran



FoxPoint sourdough.

Richard Miscovich has a poker face but keeps few cards to himself. The baker and teacher is happy to share what he knows and loves.

Meet him at any one of his teaching posts—in a large culinary classroom at Johnson & Wales in Rhode Island, and in smaller venues like King Arthur's Baking Education Center in Vermont or even the Kneading Conference in Maine—and you will learn as much as you can take in

The topic might be one of many under the umbrella of artisan bread-baking, including using sprouted-grain flours. Very often he teaches about baking and cooking with wood-fired ovens. Recently, he led an earth-oven-building workshop at Green Mountain Flour, a mill and bakery in Windsor, Vermont.

Wherever he is, the tall, lean baker wears his long, dark hair in a ponytail, and looks out at his class, his sure gaze like an arm gathering people to him. He is a fount of bread-baking knowledge, and is always ready to answer questions and problem solve.

His desire to connect with people who have a desire to learn is apparent his recently released book, *From the Wood Fired Oven: New and Traditional Techniques for Cooking and Baking with Fire*. The cookbook offers the print experience of a Miscovich classroom. In the book you get almost all of him, except the question-and-answer sessions. And you'll have to make all the goodies yourself, which should not be a trial since his recipes are good maps that provide solid routes to the various foods he highlights, not just bread alone. You learn a lot about the hows and whys of cooking in this book, not just with wood heat but with any heat.

The book is earning high placement on some great bread bookshelves. Wheat breeder Steve Jones directs Washington State University's Mount Vernon Station. The station's Bread Lab conducts research on flour and bread, and hosts classes.

"We get a lot of people coming though the Bread Lab and they often tell us what book or books they are using," said Jones. "Invariably they are the wrong books, either one from the '70s or unmentionable recent ones. Really, all they need is Jeffery Hamelman's *Bread* and now, as a companion, Richard's book."

The book is evidence of the 20-plus years Richard Miscovich has been captivated by artisan bread. The Michigan native landed smack dab in the heart of the American bread movement, taking workshops at the San Francisco Baking Institute when it was founded in 1996. On the same trip he sought out baker and oven builder Alan Scott.

"The wood-fired oven thing hadn't started yet, the local grain movement hadn't even begun," said Miscovich of his visit. "Alan had his whole little setup, with grain growing behind his house and the wood-fired oven and the mill—he was doing all of it."

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Miscovich was versed in bread by Dan Leader's 1974 book, *Bread Alone* but his introduction to the world of bread came when he was studying English at Michigan State University. He had a job in a grocery store's bakery, baking loaves of frozen dough that came from a larger facility.

"There was a lot of Old World bread there, coming up from Detroit," Miscovich recalled. "I saw people come every Thursday just to buy it."

Bread moved front and center after his experiences in San Francisco when, by then in North Carolina, Miscovich built an Alan Scott oven in his backyard and started a micro-bakery.

"Richard is one of those very rare individuals that has managed to turn his passion into a career," said Christopher French, baking instructor at Manchester Community College in Connecticut. "This is more than just a way he earns a living, he has a zeal for it."

A zeal, yes, but not an evangelism. Miscovich has a reserved quality that might be described as Midwestern. He will not drown you in unwanted facts, or his personality.

French met Miscovich when Miscovich was teaching a class at King Arthur Flour in Vermont, and the two connected over baking and oven building. French is also a mason and wanted to build a wood-fired oven for his sister and sister-in-law; to learn the ropes of how to use bricks for baking, he helped Miscovich build an oven.

Their friendship is still very bread-based. French assists him at workshops, leading the oven at the Kneading Conference, a two-day bread, grains and oven workshop held the last weekend of each July in central Maine.

French sits in on other classes, too, to expand his knowledge of techniques, and take a page from Miscovich's teaching style.



Richard Miscovich at the Kneading Conference.

"He's extremely generous in how he approaches his students," said French. "Whenever I watch Richard, I think, that's the kind of instructor I'm aiming to be. He's so easy to approach; he has so much patience."

Indeed, Miscovich is a teacher's teacher. He teaches a class at Johnson & Wales on the topic of teaching baking.

"He's really thoughtful about how to get complicated ideas across to people who have little or no experience," said Andrew Janjigian, associate editor at *Cook's Illustrated* and a baking instructor known for his take on pizza dough. "He's kind of a 'cool' teacher that also teaches well, and inspires people in their baking. He did that for me."

The first class Janjigian took from Miscovich was a scoring and shaping practicum at King Arthur. The two had a good rapport and Janjigian took pictures of an oven build, the same one where Chris French observed and assisted.

Miscovich traces his informal study of teaching to his baking days at King Arthur.

“I was very lucky to work for King Arthur when the bakery and the Baking Education Center were in the same facility,” said Miscovich. “It gave me the opportunity to observe Jeffrey Hamelman teach the five-day professional course every month or so.”

This exposed him to the science and the method of bread baking. He also learned to read group dynamics, and how to move a group of people through an entire day of bread baking. Team teaching with Johnson & Wales colleagues Mitch Stamm, Ciril Hitz, Luminita Cirstea and Mark Harvey also helped develop his style.

“Bread baking is a comforting act,” said Miscovich. “I want a class to feel relaxed and confident so they can harvest as much good energy as possible while taking away skills to make their life more resilient and delicious.”

Darra Goldstein also thinks he’s a very talented baker and teacher. The cookbook author and founding editor of the food journal *Gastronomica*, she has an Alan Scott oven in her home in Western Massachusetts. She met Miscovich at the Kneading Conference a few years ago, and likes how the book conveys the spirit of cooking with wood.

“Richard encourages you to enter into a different kind of rhythm, one that isn’t about just making a dish for dinner but thinking in long terms about how best to capture the fire’s heat and use it at many different stages, and for many different kinds of foods, not just bread,” she said. “It’s about self-sufficiency but not in any kind of hunkering-down way—it’s a celebration of fire and smoke and deliciousness.”

Visit KingArthurFlour.com, BreadHitz.com and KneadingConference.com for information about classes and events.

While not written as a follow up to *The Bread Builders* (Chelsea Green, 1999), the title that remains a bible for people starting micro-bakeries and building wood-fired ovens, *From the Wood-Fired Oven: New and Traditional Techniques for Cooking and Baking with Fire* (Chelsea Green, 2013) is certainly cloth cut for the same crowd. Dan Wing—co-author, with Alan Scott of *The Bread Builders*—wrote the introduction to Richard Miscovich’s book. Even if you have no interest in wood-fired ovens, the information about food, cooking and bread baking make the book appealing to armchair cooks and veteran cooks and bakers alike.

Amy Halloran is writing a book about regional grain production. She makes pancakes at least once a day and writes about baking for Zester Daily, Culinate and From Scratch Club.

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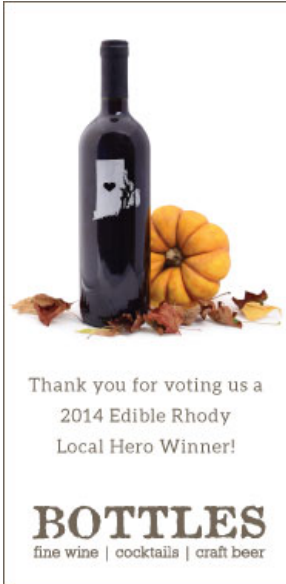
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