



# RISING STAR

Every day, Chad Robertson of San Francisco's Tartine Bakery & Cafe turns out 240 fresh loaves—and within an hour, they're snapped up. Meet the cult prince of American breadmaking. By Oliver Strand. Photographed by Ralph Mecke.



## MAN OF THE FLOUR

"I'm trying to be a catalyst for the process," says Robertson, here at the Bar Tartine oven. "I'm trying to steer it, not manhandle it."

Details, see In This Issue. Sittings Editor: Kathryn Neale.

**T**he complete recipe for Basic Country Bread, the edible hero of Chad Robertson's 2010 cookbook *Tartine Bread*, runs 38 pages, including photographs. It's a masterpiece along the lines of a Martin Scorsese tracking shot or a Marcel Proust sentence: It goes on forever, and when you get to the end you realize it shouldn't be any shorter. The prose is lean and direct; the instructions don't just tell you what to do but explain why, what

to look for, and how to make corrections. With this recipe, some matches, and a knife, you could start a civilization.

Seemingly, Robertson gave away the store. The bread he teaches you to make is essentially the same bread that has turned him into one of the most influential bakers in the world; it is what causes otherwise rational adults to mob the line at Tartine Bakery, the San Francisco shop that Robertson

brought his bread when it was still warm. It was like no bread I'd had—it was custardy, it was glistening." Pollan was so awed he apprenticed himself to Robertson in the course of writing his book. "Chad's just so thoughtful about what he's doing. He has an intensity about him, a conviction that I admire. Every loaf of bread matters."

Christian F. Puglisi, the Copenhagen chef behind Relæ (creative, casual, one Michelin star) and Manfreds & Vin (cult natural wines, ox tartare, disco ball), who was once the sous-chef at Noma, expresses his admiration this way: "I am very jealous of San Franciscans both because a place like Tartine is there and because the culture is there for a place like Tartine. Every day they sell out all of their bread. It is rewarding to see."

Only 240 loaves come out of Robertson's ovens; they're available around 5:00 P.M. at \$8 apiece, and within an hour they're gone. Regulars will call three days in advance to reserve theirs. (The myth is that Robertson bakes in the afternoon so that he can go surfing in the morning, and while there's some truth to it—he does like to surf—the timing is more practical

than poetic: Morning buns, croissants, cookies, and pastries are baked earlier in the day.) Another 40 or so loaves are baked a couple of blocks away at Bar Tartine, the restaurant he and his wife opened in 2005, which has been awarded a Bib Gourmand by the Michelin Guide in recognition of the elegant cooking by cochefs Nicolaus Balla and Cortney Burns: Central European food executed with Californian ingredients and a Japanese aesthetic. (It's weird on paper, dazzling on the plate.) Robertson installed a bread oven to one side of the dining room; now the restaurant serves as his idea lab.

On a Saturday morning, this is where I watch him bake—a trim 41-year-old Texas native with chestnut hair, hazel eyes, and a beard that seems temporary, as if he just came back from vacation and is waiting for his wife to tell him to shave. His movements are so fluid and measured that you hardly notice how many intricate steps it takes to get a loaf from a banneton, a stiff straw

basket lined with Belgian linen, into the oven. "I'm trying to be a catalyst for the process," Robertson tells me. "I'm trying to steer it, not manhandle it. I know what I want the dough to do, and I'm trying to help it get there." He works on four kinds of bread, each of which he incises with a different pattern (an aesthetic gesture and also practical—scoring allows the dough to expand and steam to escape). For some he uses a narrow rod like a conductor's baton but tipped with a double-edged razor blade, slicing the surface with short, sure strokes. For others, it's a pair of sewing scissors, cutting the skin with dainty snips.

While most bakers dress as if they're about to paint the living room, Robertson wears jeans, white espadrilles, and a Thom Browne shirt with a fine blue check. "It was Dries for a long time," he says, handling a baker's peel as long as a pool skimmer. Robertson aimed to study architecture before enrolling at the Culinary Institute of America, and his style is unforced, part hippie, part aesthete. "I like my sprouts. And when I'm in London, I like to stay at Claridge's."

Later, over dinner at Bar Tartine—a sumptuous space with sustainable-redwood paneling, hand-thrown plates, a slab of



#### FEAST YOUR EYES

A Tartine selection of house-made bread, sausage, and cheese; the bakery produces several types of country loaves, baguettes, and Scandinavian-style rye and crispbreads.

opened in 2002 with his wife, Elisabeth Prueitt. It calls for a natural starter, a 30-hour rise, and a dough so wet that it looks like batter. The dough's so-called hydration percentage is at the outer limits of what a home cook can handle—750 grams of water per one kilogram of flour, or 75 percent hydration—and at Tartine, Robertson pushes the number to 85 percent, sometimes even higher than 90 percent. Folding and shaping dough like that, one of the bakers at Tartine told me, is like "handling water." But the result changes your thinking about bread: Fresh out of the oven, each loaf has a shell of blistered mahogany and an interior so chewy and preternaturally moist that it shimmers in the light.

The writer Michael Pollan simply calls it "the best bread I ever tasted" in *Cooked*, the *New York Times* best-seller published in April. Over the phone, Pollan describes the first time he sampled a loaf: "There was a dinner party, and somebody

white marble mounted on the bread oven—he tells me, “I wish more people would *cook* with my bread.” People are too reverential, he thinks, and afraid to do anything more than serve his bread on its own. “What if you treat it like bluefin tuna?” he asks. “Cut it thick, lacquer it with a little olive oil or butter, then grill it on one side, or sear it in a pan with butter. You crisp up one side, and the rest turns custardy.”

In fact, I have had Robertson’s bread prepared just this way by Danny Bowien, the wildly inventive chef of Mission Chinese Food in Manhattan and San Francisco (who once cooked at Bar Tartine) at a benefit in New York for Edible Schoolyard NYC. Robertson had flown into New York that morning with several loaves. (When he arrived at the benefit, the NYPD was sweeping the venue in advance of Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Robertson handed the bread through a door guarded by an officer.) Bowien sent a plate to my table piled with grilled slices dressed with Genovese pesto, and we all grabbed for them like carp at feeding time.

Bowien says he is planning to use Tartine bread again—a rye this time—at another benefit. “We’re going to wrap a really nice spot prawn with a thin slice; we’re going to shave it, then cook it in olive oil so that it crisps up,” he says. “That bread brings out the most of everything it touches.”

Robertson sells loaves to only two restaurants, both in San Francisco: Delfina, next to Tartine Bakery in the Mission District, gets ten a day, and Saison over in South of Market gets four a week. Joshua Skenes, the Saison chef, told me in an e-mail that he doesn’t use it for the bread course, but in a savory toffee—with duck liver dish. “Our concern at Saison is to find the deepest point in any given ingredient. It’s about subtraction rather than addition, really. Chad has done just that with bread.”

At home, I followed Robertson’s instructions, searing thickly cut slices so that they were crisp on one side and as creamy as pudding within. I was planning to serve them to guests topped with different compositions—crème fraîche, smoked bluefish and arugula flowers, cultured butter and sea urchin—but I was so drawn by the texture that most of the pieces I cooked didn’t make it out of the kitchen.

That unusual creaminess was even more pronounced in Robertson’s latest creation: “porridge breads,” which he started developing only last October and which he’ll fully reveal in *Tartine Book No. 3*, to be published this November by Chronicle Books. These are made with polenta or with whole grains like buckwheat that are cooked or sprouted before being mixed into the dough. Usually, whole grains turn bread into a dense brick, but Robertson’s version is miraculous, with generous air pockets that bakers call *alveoli*. “I want whole grain, but I don’t want the aesthetics of whole grain,” he says.

The key is that he’s not asking the buckwheat or corn or oats or quinoa to do any of the lifting. Instead, their job is to provide flavor—he treats them as if they were olives or walnuts. “It’s cheating,” he said. “A friend said I’m ‘bending the math,’ which I like.”

So far, Robertson has been careful not to expand too quickly. For now, 240 loaves plus 40 is enough. Plenty of suitors—in Denver, Dallas, Chicago, Bogotá, Mexico City, Johannesburg, and Melbourne—want him to open another location. “If it’s a place that has good surf, they’ll use that as

an enticement,” Robertson tells me. A Los Angeles developer sent him a bound prospectus that included Photoshopped images of Robertson beside a state-of-the-art oven. Once, the royal household of a small Asian kingdom requested that Robertson teach them how to bake bread. Robertson told me he thought about it for a day before declining. It’s hard to tell His Majesty’s staff they’re getting it wrong.

The issue for Robertson is that he feels his bread can’t be scaled up. Any new Tartine Bakery should be helmed by a baker Robertson trusts, who turns out only about 240 loaves a day. The problem is finding a partner willing to invest in such a small-scale business. Finding backers who want to leverage the Tartine brand is easy; the key is to find those who share Robertson’s vision, who understand why the recipe for the basic country loaf has to be 38 pages long. He thinks he has found the right people to open an outpost in London, possibly next year. Another in Tokyo might follow.

He’d like to be in New York, too—but instead of a fully functioning operation with croissants and cookies and morn-



#### HOME BY THE GRAINS

One key to Tartine’s taste is Robertson’s use of ingredients like the heritage wheats grown at Front Porch Farm, which sits along the Russian River. In this story: grooming, Joshua Conover; food styling, Jen Straus. Details, see In This Issue.

ing buns, he’s thinking of something called the Tartine Annex, which would sell only bread. “I want a baker in residence, just one baker, 300 loaves a day, six days a week, which is just at the limit of what a highly skilled baker could do,” Robertson says. The baker would stay for four months, stopping before he or she burned out. “It wouldn’t be Tartine Bakery, but it would have the flavor and drive, the texture, the spirit. It would be a performance.”

It’s bread as a luxury good, not because of the price (a loaf in New York might cost \$10) but because of the craft that goes into each, and because so few are made. One of the most misused words in food today is *artisanal*—it should refer to something made by an artisan, but it usually is shorthand for “we’re new at this.” Robertson snaps the word back into its proper place. □