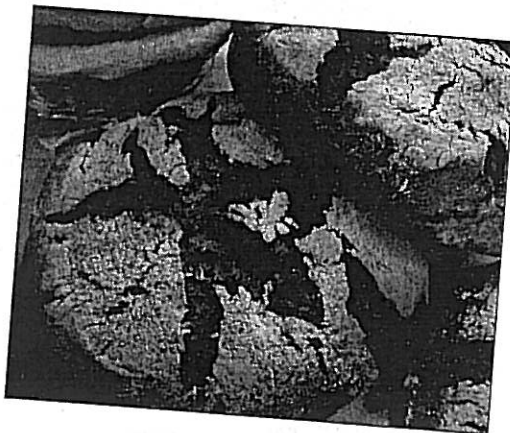


Bake to basics at Born and Bread

London's Born and Bread set up four months ago with a 20-tonne wood oven and a passion for traditionally made artisan bread. It now supplies some of the capital's top restaurants. Mary Barber finds out more



Standing in the corner of the bakery is an enormous 20-tonne wood-burning oven – possibly the only one of its type and size in the country.

“You can’t bake true artisan bread by sticking it in a deck oven,” says Manuel Monade. “As much as you handcraft it and don’t use any additives, you are cooking it in an unnatural environment. This is how it used to be baked 100 years ago, in a wood-fired oven of some kind. So we wanted to be true to the artisan method.”

Bread credentials

Manuel’s bread-making credentials were established in 1995 when he worked at the acclaimed St John restaurant, in London. His bread became so popular that it was sold to other businesses in the area. In 2002, he left to work with Tracey and Tony, owners of East Dulwich Deli, in London, which sells organic produce. Tony had worked as a chef in his family’s business for 19 years before opening the

shop.

It took Manuel two years of research before he found the right oven – a Llopi – and was ready to bake. This time was also spent visiting France to source flour and to train in wood fire

baking with award-winning baker Jaques Mahou. The wait was obviously worth it. “The quality of the product coming out of the oven is outstanding,” he says. Born and Bread is now also the agent for Llopi in the UK.

Manuel, who moved here in 1987 from France, was also keen to use wood as a sustainable source of fuel to heat the oven, rather than gas or electricity, which, he says, can have a detrimental impact on the environment.

Noise pollution was also a consideration when choosing the oven. Standing in the bakery it is noticeable how quiet it is without the incessant drone of an oven motor.

The oven is based on a design made in 1947 by Juan Llopi, a draftsman from Barcelona who had been inspired by the Roman ovens of Pompeii.

It was the first oven to have a mechanical revolving base (the sole) that allowed bakers to achieve consistency of finished product while producing large volumes of bread. Manuel currently produces 1,000 loaves a day, but as the business expands, he hopes to increase this to 5,000.

The oven, which is quite widely used in Europe, is 15 metres in diameter and was originally delivered to the bakery on 14 separate pallets. It took three weeks to build.

The inner chamber is made of a special

reflective material and it is encased in an outer wall of steel. The cavity in between is filled with Diatomea, a powdered fossilised seaweed that is mined near Barcelona.

After the initial build, the oven was allowed to dry out and was then fired for the first time using three-and-a-half tonnes of wood. The warming up process took two weeks, gradually increasing the temperature to 250°C. After this tempering, only a small amount of wood was needed each day to maintain the temperature. The oven is so well insulated that if it is not given fuel for a month it will still burn at 60°C.

“When I take the bread out the oven goes down to 230°C, but then it rests and goes back up to 250°C. This means the next day I can bake straight away,” explains Manuel.

Wood works

A woodman from a managed woodland, near Sevenoaks, in Kent, delivers a batch of hard wood to the bakery once a fortnight.

Tracey says: “The smoke that it produces (which goes up a flue) is clean and the wood comes from sustainable managed forests, making it one of the most environmentally sound ways to bake.”

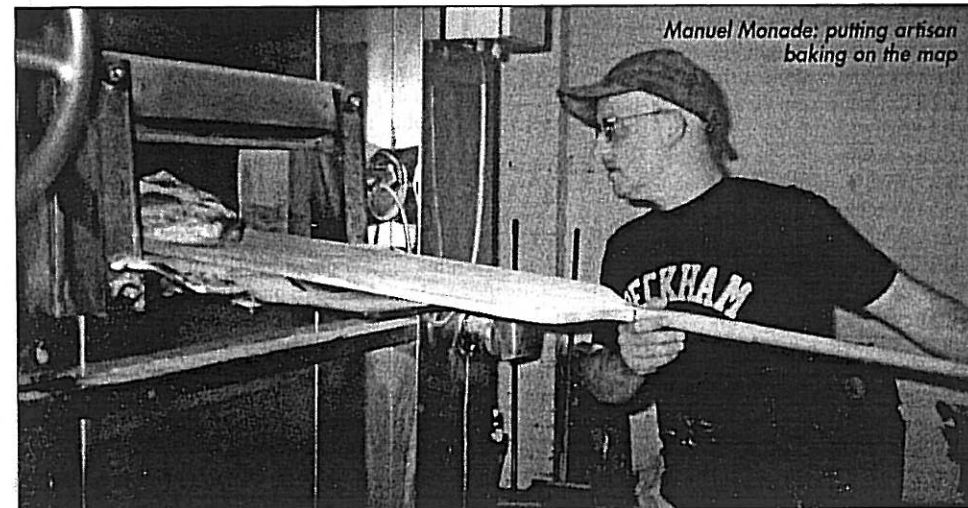
Smoke is prevented from getting to the bread because the oven is split into two. The revolving sole is made of very thick metal and

‘The oven was delivered on 14 separate pallets and took three weeks to build’

‘We bake free from additives, chemicals and preservatives’

“We wanted bread to taste how it used to and that meant going back to look at how it used to be made. It meant working really hard to revive a tradition to sell bread in its natural state.”

The company’s ‘back to basics’ approach is evident the moment I walk through the door.



is airtight. The wood burns under there. Water is placed in the top part of the oven enabling moist heat to create a perfect crust and crumb.

But what about the fire risks? Tracey assures me there are none, "unless you are a complete fool when operating it", she says. "It is just like putting wood on a fire, probably safer because you have a door that you must keep closed."

But there is a downside. The oven was not cheap – it cost £60,000 to be precise. Wood costs about £360 a month. On the upside, there are no electricity or gas bills to pay and maintenance is minimal.

But as Tracey, who manages the accounts and administration, admits: "It cost us a lot of sleepless night. But we believe it was absolutely the right thing to do."

Sticking to traditions

The oven was clearly bought as a long-term investment. As Manuel says: "We've got something that we know is going to be working in 40 years – it has no motor, it can't break down. In that time you could have two electric ovens."

As well as traditional equipment, Born and Bread uses traditional ingredients and methods to create its simple line of breads. This includes a Kentish Flute, a slim traditional baguette, a white loaf, a wholemeal loaf, focaccia bread and a round rye bread.

The company buys its flour from a supplier called Borsa, which is based in the Loire Valley, France, because it guarantees traceability of origin.

"This was key for us as we need the same strain of wheat to provide consistency," says Tracey. "When you are baking with simple and traditional methods that are as much an art as a science, it is important to use quality ingredients that have not been pre-blended."

The flour Born and Bread uses is stone milled, unbleached, and additive and preservative free. "This enables the grain to maintain all



'The flour used is stone milled, unbleached, and additive and preservative free'

those beneficial vitamins and enzymes that would otherwise be lost in the factory milling process," explains Tracey.

There are up to nine different graded flours to choose from – there are four types of white flour, three types of rye and two types of wholemeal. Manuel explains: "It creates an opportunity for more creativity because there is different taste and texture."

The master baker, who has two assistants, uses a sourdough starter from water and grain flour to ferment the dough, which also includes sea salt for its mineral content and flavour, and

water. To speed up the action of the airborne wild yeast in the starter, he adds organic fruit, purchased from farmers in Kent. He also puts in a small amount of organic baker's yeast.

The bread dough is then hand cut – the only piece of mechanical equipment in the bakery is a mixer – and placed in proving baskets. The Kentish flute is hand rolled and wrapped in a linen cloth.

Manuel likes to bake the bread as late in the morning as he possibly can – they start work at 10pm and finish between 6am and 7am – to bring the freshest bread to their customers. As the oven's heat is quite intense a loaf takes just 15 to 20 minutes to bake.

Since opening the bakery in February, bread orders have gone up by 25%. As well as supplying their own deli and running a mail order

business selling their rye bread, the company also has 37 accounts with customers that range from restaurants, such as Gastro in Clapham, cafés, delis, and farmers markets to a fish and chip shop in Clerkenwell, London.

Also recently added to this list was Michelin-starred chef Gordon Ramsey for his restaurant, 68 Hospital Road, in Chelsea. Clearly, the chef, who is not known for mincing his words, was impressed with the product. Tracey said she was delighted: "This is really great new for us. We're really pleased to win the order."

Future ambitions

In five years time the company aims to be producing 5,000 loaves a day for 100 accounts – their limit – with a waiting list. But as Tracey says: "Although we are small bakery we have no intention of being huge because we want to stay true to what we are doing."

Interest in artisan baking is on the increase. "For a while independent bakers were dying out in this country," she said. "But as people have begun to understand more about organic foods and healthy living, the industry is beginning to grow."

But there is still a long way to go. "In France there is a big artisan tradition," she explains. "Bread is more respected there – it has real value. It belongs in the centre of the table. In this country we expect a loaf to last a week, which is sad."

But the ethos at Born and Bread is not simply about using traditional methods and running a successful business – the deli, which opened in 2001, has a £500,000 a year turnover. The Woodwards are also keen to be a part of the local community, by offering support and employment. All the staff live locally, including their sales manager and the assistants.

Support has included a children's cookery school above the deli and baking classes with Manuel in the bakery. "We want to show, particularly children, that food is more than just a way to stay alive – some of them didn't even know where a potato came from. We

wanted to teach them that what they are putting in their stomach is just as important as what they are putting on their skin," says Tracey.

And the mum-of-two should know. Before the deli and bakery were opened she had over 20 years experience in the cosmetics industry. She was sales director at Aveda and general manager for Modern Organic Products.

Manuel is also keen to set up a training school for people who are interested in traditional artisan baking methods. "I think there is a need to train another type of baker in this country. The colleges train people for working in the industry where everything has to be done now for the supermarket," he says.

But as Tracey adds: "We don't necessarily mean young people. It could be someone who is 45 and been made redundant and wants to learn. Or those who are disillusioned with the industry and want to go back to its roots."

And true to their word, they have recently employed a trainee baker who used to be a vet.

Belief

As well as encouraging people to train as artisan bakers the Woodwards are also keen to encourage others to set up similar businesses.

"It is not like we want to take over the world," says Tracey. "We would rather help other people do it and just stick to our own area."

Born and Bread has come a long way since it opened four months ago. In the beginning, Manuel did all the baking and Tracey and Tony delivered the bread.

Tracey says: "It has been scary. It was a big risk because our competition is twenty-first century bread and we are trying to bring something back through the ages. You really have to have belief in yourself,

your business and your community to make it work."

As I walk back through the green door to that twenty-first century world, something tells me it will. ■

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Tracey Woodward is keen to involve the local community