

# Food + Chef

MAGAZINE

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# Bakers, Baguettes and Boules

By: Mike Alexander

Skim through any book or brochure of life in France and it won't be long before you come across a photo of some gnarled character carrying an armful of baguettes under their arm. In the tiny village in which I lived for many years there were no fewer than ten different outlets selling bread. As if the diversity of bakers is not confusing enough, enter any boulangerie and you will be confronted with a wide, and at first, baffling display of breads. If you think you will eventually get your head around all that is on offer, forget it. As soon as you move down the road the array will vary as many of the products are regional.



**T**o say the French are passionate about bread would be an understatement. It played a huge part in the toppling of the monarchy during the French Revolution when only the elite were able to afford fine, white wheat, flour. During that time bakers refused to serve bread to the executioner and were eventually ordered to do so by royal decree. Following

the royal command the loaf for the executioner was then always presented upside down as a mark of contempt and today an inverted loaf is still seen as extremely bad luck. The vast peasant population, who consumed fifty percent of their daily calories from bread, began calling for "pain de l'égalité" or bread of equality. In the ensuing revolution it was not long before the king was meeting the executioner personally.



When Napoleon finally came to power he was quick to grasp the magnitude of the problem and introduced decrees governing not only the quality of the flour but also the amount of kneading and mixing that was to take place. Bread making in France has seen bureaucratic interventions of one form or another ever since.

Despite a decline in consumption, the French are still big consumers of bread and tend to eat it with every meal. It is seldom eaten from a side plate but is instead placed directly onto the table beside the place setting and is generally not eaten with butter. There are so many differing types of bread in this country that whole books have been dedicated to the subject and even then there will be regional specialties that may have gone unnoticed. Some of the better known loaves include the "couronne" or crown which is a round loaf with a hole in the middle, the "boule" or ball from which the word boulanger or baker is derived and the pavé, shaped like a paving stone.





Bread comes free with any meal at restaurants and no chef would be allowed to graduate from a recognized cooking school in this country until he was adept at bread making.

Without doubt, the loaf most commonly associated with France is the baguette which probably

translates best to wand or stick. The baguette did not really become institutionalized here until 1920 when bakers were banned from starting work before 4 a.m. As most bread purchases are made in the morning this left bakers in a position of not being able to get their product cooked in time to meet their client's demands.





The thinner baguette was much quicker to bake and an institution was born. Under French law a baguette must contain nothing other than wheat flour, salt, water and yeast and must conform to strict norms as regards size and weight. With so many controls one would expect one baguette to taste pretty much like another. In

fact nothing could be further from the truth and each baker makes his own subtle variations to proportions and the baking or kneading process that will alter both taste and texture. A fine example of this is the competition held each April for the prestigious contract of supplying bread to the Elysée Presidential Palace.



There are normally more than two hundred different entries and each loaf is judged by an array of experts, bakers and press. Ideally the perfect baguette should have a dark crunchy crust with a soft chewy interior, filled with plenty of irregular sized holes.

It is not in the least uncommon to see people walking home from the boulangerie with a half

dozen baguettes tucked beneath their arm whilst contentedly munching on one of the freshly broken off ends or "quignon." With no artificial preservatives it is not possible to prevent a baguette going stale quite quickly but pain perdu, or French toast, provides a delicious remedy to this problem. As the French saying goes, "long is a day without bread."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike has lived and worked in France for the past twelve years. Although he writes on a broad range of subjects ranging from nature to gardening, Mike has found himself being drawn more and more into the field of food writing. Here cooking goes beyond passion and takes on an almost mythical life of its own. Such feeling is infectious and when embraced, provides a wonderful window both into French culture and the lives of the people that live here.