

# BREAD Lines



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# BBGA'S ARTISAN MARKETPLACE SERVES UP EDUCATION AT IBIE



PHOTO: JOHN UNREIN

By **JOHN KVASNOSKY** Guild Member and Serious Home Baker – Seattle, WA

**A**lthough artisan baking is only a tiny sliver of the estimated annual \$30-billion-plus U.S. baking market, Guild members served up a significant portion of the training offered at the 2019 International Baking Industry Exposition (IBIE), held in Las Vegas on September 7–11.

As it did earlier this year at the first International Artisan Bakery Expo (IABE), also in Las Vegas, The Guild partnered with the event's organizer to supply instructors for demonstrations, aimed at sharing artisan tips and techniques with bakers attending the show.

For the first time, Guild members worked in a state-of-the-art baking space within the

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As bakers, we all envision beautiful loaves of bread and well-orchestrated bake days. This year's Regional Events lineup is designed to bring those visions into sharper focus, with an apt theme: 2020 Vision.

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# JIM WILLIAMS / BACKDOOR BREAD INTERVIEW

By **LUCAS MONAHAN** Guild Member and Head Baker, Flour Bakery & Cafe — Boston, MA  
& **MITCH STAMM** Guild Board Vice Chair. Author and Instructor, Johnson & Wales University, Providence, RI

**From its inception, how did Backdoor Bread evolve? Was there a catalyst or moment when you decided to focus on creating Backdoor Bread rather than integrating its ethos into Seven Stars? Or was it a process?**

Going back 8 or 9 years, I wasn't baking much, just spending time running a business and managing others. And it felt hollow. To keep myself entertained, I started something I called the "Thursday Bread." Every month I'd create a different bread, bake it on Thursdays, and deliver it to be sold alongside Seven Stars' other bread. So I was baking again, but it wasn't enough. There was a real disconnect with the customers and staff. Some of them understood and liked the Thursday bread, but others were confused. In the end, while I enjoyed the routine, I wanted a proper production, with more varieties and more volume.

In late 2013, I took a trip back to my home state of California, to meet legendary whole-grain baker Dave Miller. I went hoping to learn about whole grains and left knowing a mill was in our future. It was a 9-month old bag of Kamut\*\* flour that really did it. I realized that fresh flour would be the only way to capture the aroma and flavor of Dave's bread — I would have to mill the Kamut\*\* myself. After we started milling, sometime in 2014, I started getting more interested in wheat varieties and whole grains.

The Seven Stars Bakery facility is in an old mill building that hosts the Pawtucket Winter Farmers Market. Our back door opens into the middle of the market. We decided to have an open house showcasing our new little Ostirroler mill, so I made a few whole-grain breads, and

they sold out fast. I decided to open the doors again the following week with a few more whole-grain breads, and they sold out again. Maybe this was the opportunity I was looking for, the chance to do a proper production with a variety of different breads. Lynn suggested naming it Backdoor Bread, and it grew from there. I didn't plan for it to be so focused on single-variety wheats. But by then, I had been to Dave's a few times, and we had become friends. His focus on single varieties was having a significant impact on me.

Although Backdoor Bread had a strong influence on the daily Seven Stars breads, it remained my production. It was happening during the regular Seven Stars schedule, but I was keeping it separate. I wasn't interested in producing more bread than I could make by myself.

**What were the most surprising lessons (production and bread quality) as you transitioned to freshly milled flour?**

So many lessons! The most overt lessons were the extra work involved and the additional commitment to cleaning. Training, one of the biggest challenges in any bakery, also became more intense. Systems and schedules became even more critical. We had always relied on the miller's expertise. Millers spend their entire careers learning how best to turn that little seed into flour. When we switched overnight to milling flour for ourselves, we made lots of mistakes. Luckily we discovered that putting grain into a mill and producing usable flour is pretty easy. And since we were milling daily, we were able to correct and learn from our mistakes immediately. From our daily milling, we learned how temperature and humidity affect both stored grain



Jim Williams in front of his mill.

and the milling process, as well as how stones wear over time. We learned that adjustments on a stone mill are constant, and a miller needs to be in tune. We were training mixers to do this!

Some argue that bakers should let millers focus on what they do best. I agree — unless the baker in question is genuinely committed. I don't think milling will be right for every bakery. I intentionally located the mill in our temperature-controlled mixing room so that milling could easily be incorporated into a mixing shift while keeping the flour temperature in check. Our mixing personnel had to become millers overnight, but since they were milling concurrently with mixing, no time was added to their day, and they could work with the flour immediately. Once that grain is cracked, the clock starts ticking; in our opinion, it isn't getting any better. So, while commercial millers say that bakers should leave the milling to them, I'd argue that it's the bakers

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JIM WILLIAMS

working with the flour daily that can have the most significant impact on flour quality. We're the ones able to tweak the milling immediately, while the millers have to send flour out and wait for results. I believe that if small-scale bakers approach milling correctly, they have a leg up on millers, but only if their commitment to milling is as strong as their commitment to making great bread.

Fermentation happens much faster, and formulas need to be adjusted to accommodate. Once that's understood, it isn't a big deal, but it can definitely catch you out.

There is a fleeting, sweet aroma in freshly milled flour that vanishes quickly. Does it carry over to the finished bread? Not necessarily, but for me, milling just before mixing is no different from how we prepare and consume any other fresh food. Would you make guacamole and let it sit a few days before eating, or cook a steak today for dinner tomorrow?

When we first started milling on the Ostiroller, we were blown away by the flavor difference. But when we received our second mill, a 40" mill from Andrew Heyn of New American Stone Mills, we were amazed at the volume of our breads. Although we were using the same grain, we were able to obtain a beautiful, fine, creamy flour, rather than the sandy flour produced on the Ostiroller. The volume of our breads increased dramatically, and once again, the flavor was taken up a notch. It was a remarkable difference.

**When you decided to sell Seven Stars, was it more about scaling back or spending more time on the craft?**

The question, "What would we do if we ever sold the business...?" was one that came up over the dinner table many times over the years. In the fall of 2017, we started thinking about it a little more seriously. What does it look like to sell Seven Stars? Do we leave Rhode Island? Do we continue baking? Would a new owner allow us to stay in RI? What about the kids? Do we know how to do anything else?

We decided to sell the business for all kinds of reasons, but it wasn't because of Backdoor Bread. It was time for a

change — a new chapter. The idea was to give our kids a new life, let them see that people can reinvent themselves, and show our jobs that we were in control of our lives. I'm sure there are lots of people who think we're crazy for what we did. Who sells a successful, thriving, profitable business and decides to move to the sticks? Moreover, once the business is gone, what do we do? Baking isn't my passion, but I do love it. And although I have a bachelor's degree in political science, I never did anything with it. I have no qualifications other than baking.

**What will you miss the most about Seven Stars? What will you miss the least?**

My wife Lynn and I built an amazing business that we're really proud of and will feel a connection to forever. With four locations, over 100 employees, and running 24/7/363 days a year, it had a lot of moving parts and many amazing people giving it their all every day. For 18.5 years, it was my identity. So in some ways, I've lost that and miss it. Backdoor Bread became a new "side" identity in late 2014, and that does carry on. While I miss being part of something bigger than I am, I don't miss the random calls in the middle of the night, the responsibility for others, and the constant employee turnover.

**Backdoor Bread became a cult favorite in Providence. Before you decided to move on, did Backdoor Bread influence Seven Stars' production and bread quality?**

I think so. That might be a good question for some of the bakers. For Seven Stars, milling remained the focus and a daily discussion. But while Seven Stars focused on getting the most out of a few grains, Backdoor Bread experimented with lots of different grains. I think Backdoor Bread provided a reason for Seven Stars to remain focused on milling quality and wheat quality. It started many conversations that led to decisions on how best to turn that little seed into flour. Milling is a part of the fabric that makes Seven Stars Bakery a unique place, as much as the great product and the friendly culture we built. It's what they do. There isn't any other way, and I don't see that changing in my absence.

**How did you cultivate your relationships with local farmers? How are you reaching consumers and forming a clientele?**

I usually send out an email asking if I can get some wheat and it goes from there. Meeting people is difficult for me, so having that initial introduction helps. From there, it's getting the grain into the bakery and starting to work with it. Grain farmers are some of the best people I've ever met. Friendly, generous, humble, open, caring, and like me, a little awkward. They're always excited to meet the baker who is turning their grain into a loaf of bread. Farmers don't often get to meet the end-user. It's a special connection.

As of this writing, I'm just getting going in Charlotte, VT. I've started with a pop-up bread sale at a local farm market up the road. It's going to take some time in this rural community, but so far, customers have been ecstatic. It helps that Nitty Gritty Grains, where I'm buying Redeemer wheat, is just up the road. People are familiar with the brand, and many personally know the farmer, Tom Kenyon. People in this area are invested in their land and their community. I have no doubt that Backdoor Bread has found its home.

**Are you working more or fewer hours?**

I'm only doing one bake a week at the moment. Hopefully, I'll add another day



100% whole grain and naturally leavened!

PHOTOS: JIM WILLIAMS

soon, and that should make a full-time workweek. I'm fortunate to have been able to set up a bakery on my property. I can fit the production around my lifestyle, along with the many other daily chores.

**Will you describe a day's production, beginning with your prep the day before, including milling?**

I don't set an alarm, but I usually walk in the door around 6:00am, do a build on my levain, and start milling for the day. I use a young, stiff levain with a high inoculation of 65%, which is usually ready in 2.5 to 3 hours. By the time my levain is ready, I start mixing. Some breads are fermented in bulk, then retarded shaped, while others are bulk retarded. I never was much of a believer in retarding until I started working with whole grains. I think the long, cold fermentation helps mellow out the bread and give it a lot of strength. It needs extra strength since the combination of high hydration levels and under-developing at the mixing stage can easily lead to flat loaves. Fermenting in bulk for longer can help, but whole grains

skew to overly sour very fast. I don't like sour bread, so I'm always balancing levain acidity, minimal dough development, and long bulk fermentation for strength, while attempting to keep sourness in check. I'm usually cleaned up and out the door by 1:30am or 2:00am.

The next day, I check on the oven to make sure it's up to temperature, divide the bulk-fermented doughs, and start baking. In between bakes, I do the final shaping of anything already pre-shaped. After the bake, I let the bread cool as much as possible before packing up and heading to my pop-up.

**How do you distribute the bread?**

Every bread I make is 100% one single variety of wheat, coming from small, organic, farms throughout the Northeast. The bread has a story. Since it's important to tell that story, I don't wholesale. I prefer interacting with the customer and explaining where the wheat came from and why I like it. Sampling goes a long way to telling that story, so there is always bread sliced and available to taste before purchase.

**Will you cap your growth?**

Absolutely, but no specific plans at the moment. The cap will be the amount I can produce comfortably, keeping the lifestyle I seek for myself and my family. Since I don't plan on having employees, I will have a natural cap. I'm happy to have visitors, but I'm not looking for "help."

**Are you using any commercially milled flour?**

No. Everything I make starts with berries, sourced from small organic farms. I do no sifting and never will. I have no problem with sifting (or small amounts of commercial yeast, although I don't use any). It just isn't what I do, which is grain in the mill, flour out, plus salt and some sourdough culture. The simplicity of ingredients, manipulated into a complex loaf of bread, is what keeps me interested in this fascinating craft. ✨

\*Khorasan wheat; Kamut is a trademark of Kamut International



"Garage Door Bread." Jim dividing and shaping his loaves.

