

Bread Winner



Alex has been selling her loaves from her doorstep during lockdown

Alex Wilcock's bread-making business has boomed during lockdown as customers turn to local loaves

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Hazel Buckley

When it comes to first-rate bread, artisan baker Alex Wilcock from Rise and Shine Bake House in Bordon, has the perfect sourdough recipe.

It's not surprising really because she spent five years trying to cultivate her fine product, which she sells with pride.

As flour and bread availability started to decline at the

beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Alex started churning out loaves by the baker's dozen, and was soon supplying the county and beyond with fresh, delicious bread.

Alex bakes everything herself from scratch, from rolls, bagels, focaccia and French baguettes to artisan sourdoughs and ryes; even making sweet doughnuts. Usually, Alex runs bread-making classes and sells her products at farmer's markets. Despite not being able to run her business in the usual way, her spirits haven't been dampened. She says, "I'm so busy I'm going dizzy here, business is booming – everybody wants bread".

She's up at around 4am three days a week baking. I arrived on one of her 'pick up' days and waited behind a regular customer, Paul. He usually goes to one of the market stalls she runs but has travelled to Alex's home to pick up his weekly order. He told me it's the best bread he's ever tasted.

Alex is now selling all her bread from her front door, alongside the odd delivery. Some of the markets are open again and Alex has seen how well they are being run, with social distancing rules in place but she says, "having gained more customers in lockdown, I'm considering staying at home... business is doing so well at base camp".

Raised in Portsmouth, Alex didn't have a conventional start, rather spending most of her childhood in and out of children's homes. Her early memories of food were not ones

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of mum's cooking wafting from the kitchen, or biting into freshly baked bread barely out of the oven. One memory was eating kidney and gravy on toast that she was served for breakfast. The cook was an old army chef who scared the life out of the kids. She still hates the thought of eating kidneys.

However, her experience of food all changed when Alex was adopted by an Anglo-Indian lady who ran the last children's home she attended. She will never forget her adopted nan's egg bhurji – an Indian spiced scrambled egg. It was the best thing she had ever tasted, and from that moment Alex found herself wanting to explore and embrace the world of food.

She became intrigued about ingredients and more importantly their origins, and she started to cook and experiment. She learnt quickly that, "Indian food is always accompanied by the right bread," or rather, "The bread is always accompanied by the right dish"; and she would choose the bread and then ask for advice as to which dish to

pick – just like asking for a wine recommendation. She says, "Food as a child wasn't very nice but as I got older I realised that food made people happy and I was drawn to it more and more".

Alex's first job was in child care as a nanny for a family on the Isle of Man, she remembers, "It was a real adventure, but the children were so naughty. I decided to return home, took out a loan and completed a Cordon Bleu catering course in Eastbourne. I did very well and have worked as a professional chef for 28 years. This is where I found my love for baking and pastry work."

Alex first started her career at the Queen's Hotel in Southsea. She has also worked at Creative Catering in Winchester and was Head Chef there for over five years. Alongside this she taught for over 30 years at Farnborough College of Technology alongside raising a family. Once her children had flown the nest, her love of bread took hold once again, and she decided it was the right time to follow her dream and start up her own micro-bakery.

Alex completed a course with Bread Angels (a network of award-winning bakers, who help people to bake and learn about good bread). She says, "Over a weekend I was so inspired I decided that I would like to set up my own bread-baking business; I've not looked back since". Alex is now part of this network of wonderful bread-makers and with their help, cooked up the idea of Rise and Shine Bakery.

Since lockdown more people are reaching for the flour and yeast and giving bread-making a go. When it comes to advice, Alex says, "be patient, it can be a lengthy process." Her biggest tip is, "Don't just throw more flour at it, it doesn't always work. A simple thing can ruin a batch. If it doesn't turn out just as you imagined the first time then try again."

Alex uses all types of yeast



TOP: Sourdough is the perfect lunchtime loaf

LEFT: People have been coming from all over Hampshire for Alex's sourdough loaves

RIGHT: Alex's oldest starter, Frank, was found in a friend's fridge in the back of her shed





– dry, fresh and wild but she specifically uses wild yeast for her sourdough bread. Wild yeast, also known as ‘starters’, is made by catching spores in the air. Alex explains, “Lay a cloth over the top of a mixture of flour and water (in equal parts) and let it sit on the kitchen counter. After around four to six days you will observe that the culture has doubled, smells pleasantly sour, and is full of bubbles. Keep it in the fridge and feed it once a week again with equal parts of flour and water.”

Alex calls the ‘starters’, her babies, or pets. She even names them. Her oldest is called Frank. About three years ago a friend of hers found an old ‘starter’ at the back of a fridge in her shed and offered it to Alex. Maybe, like the

infamous Doctor Frankenstein, she was the one person to bring it back to life...hence the name.

Alex’s favourite bread is focaccia because it’s easy to add seasonal ingredients. She likes being ‘cheffy’ with her bread. She also loves cheese and marmite, which happens to be her current bestseller.

Alex is hopeful she will be able to resume her courses again in September which are small and friendly. All the recipes and bread baked on the day are yours to take home and enjoy. Her passion for bread is easy to see... and taste, she says, “Bread is my life, it makes me happy – the process, diversity, flavours, texture and the happiness it brings to people every time I bake”. 🐾

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