

Monday, July 25, 2011

Tartine's Chad Robertson to Bake Bread for San Francisco's Gluten-Intolerant

By: Marla Simon



Will there soon be another reason for San Francisco locals to wait in line at Tartine? Inspired and challenged by his wife and business partner Liz Prueitt's gluten intolerance, Tartine owner Chad Robertson has been researching alternative baking methods, and will soon be offering a line of baked goods that those with gluten intolerance can handle.

Most gluten-free bakers use flour mixtures made from wheat substitutes, like rice, soy and tapioca. While Prueitt, Tartine's pastry chef, has been experimenting with these modern gluten-free flours for use in desserts, Robertson has been trying out ancient grains, which have become increasingly popular in Northern Europe.

Robertson has been interested in ancient grains since early on in his baking career and told me about what he's been working on in an interview via email from Denmark, where he's currently doing research into baking with older varieties of wheat and rye.

"My first baking mentors in the U.S. and France were using some ancient grains such as spelt, kamut, einkorn and emmer varieties. At the time it was all about different flavors and very high nutritional content using these ancient grains. Now it seems that many of these grains may be much more easily digestible for people with gluten intolerance."

Robertson began his research in Northern Jutland, a few months back. There he worked with Jorn Ussing Larsen at Aurion, a biodynamic bakery in Hjørring. Larsen is known for his work with traditional grains milled on site, and breads leavened without yeast.

On Robertson's current trip, he has been baking at Claus Meyer's bakery in Copenhagen, where

organic heirloom wheat, specially milled in Sweden, is used to produce artisan breads. Meyer is world renowned for his restaurant Noma with chef Rene Redzepi. Robertson also traded some of his own baking secrets in a master cooking class he taught at Meyer's nearby cooking school.

According to Robertson, "The character of the gluten in older (less manipulated) varieties of wheat is different--usually more difficult to bake with--but more easily digested by many people." He added, "I am focusing on the ancient varieties now to see if there is something that can be uncovered with the way wheat is grown and the way our bodies react to it with the goal of regaining some of the perse grains we have had generations before."

The couple will return home from Europe in a few days and will begin rotating some of the new breads into the baking schedule right away. As soon as they are perfected, they will be added to Tartine's regular production. In addition to the new breads, Robertson is thinking about adding some traditional, whole-grain Danish pastries made with unrefined sugars to the menu.

There are various levels of gluten-intolerance, ranging from a minor sensitivity to a more serious condition known as celiac disease. While ancient grains may be tolerated by some who have a sensitivity to modern wheat, several of these grains do contain gluten and may not be safe for those with celiac disease.