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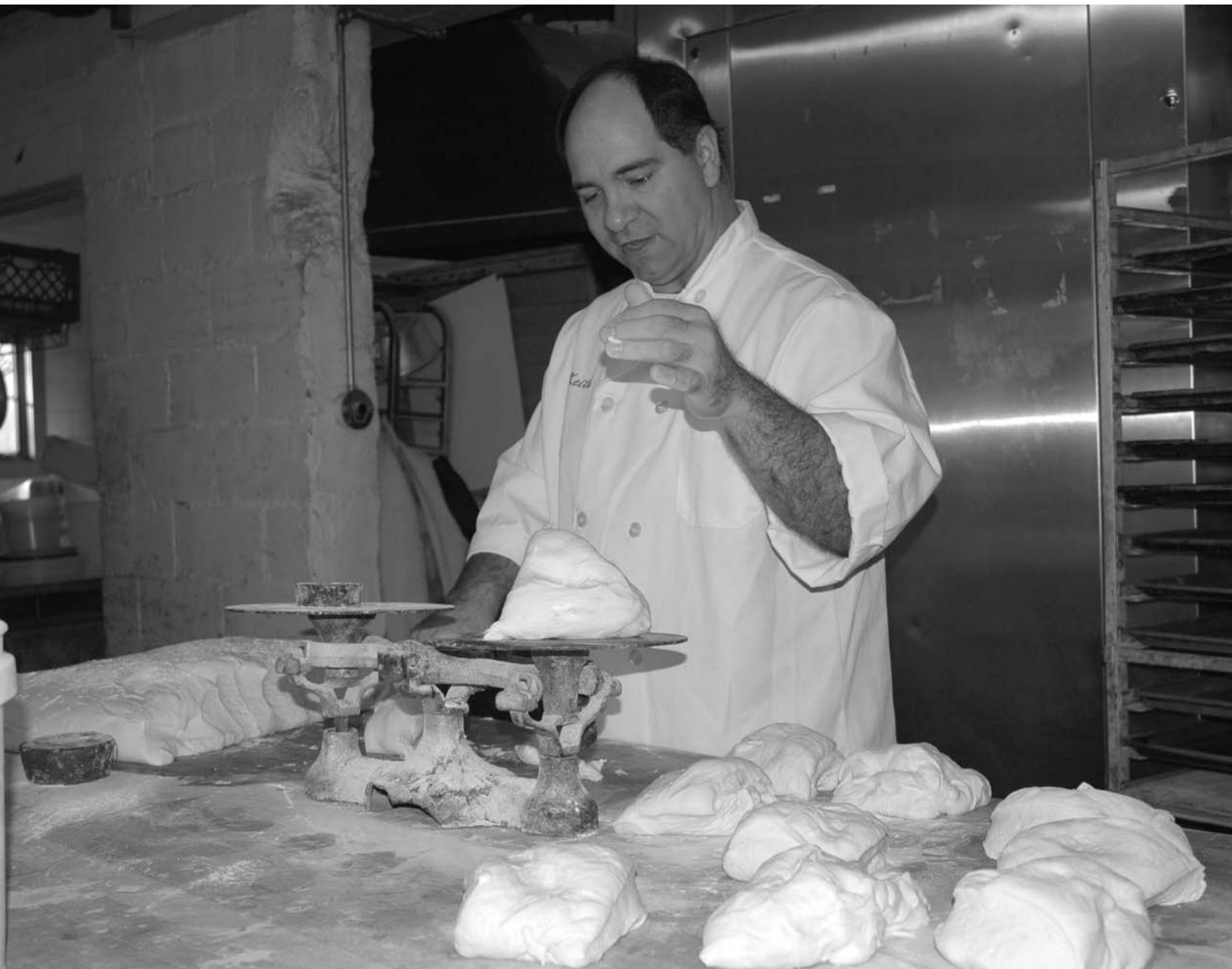
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## IN THE KITCHEN

BY E.L. WYVES

# THE BREAD REFORMER

*A baker revives the tradition of baking in America.*



SOUTHAMPTON—About nine years ago, a baker working at the Bridgehampton King Kullen inspired the chain's flagship store to “upgrade” its bread. America was beginning to discover olive oil, raw-milk cheeses, mesclun, and handcrafted foods that promised more flavor and more substance. The baker sensed that people who had long been satisfied by unsatisfying Wonder-esque loaves might also be com-

ing around to the yeasty pleasures of the staff of life. King Kullen started carrying artisan breads from companies like Ecce Panis and Eli's, and it modified the recipes of its house-baked breads, shifting from run-of-the-mill standards like cinnamon-raisin and white to California sourdough, sunflower bread and olive loaves.

The baker who started this quiet revolution at Long Island's largest



roughly 40 different combinations to make his two dozen or so different breads. There's a dough for Danishes, another for croissants, another for grainy German breads and another for baguettes. He calls his different starters and cultures by their native names—*poolishes*, *bigas*, *levains* and a German term that he's afraid to mention because he can't remember how to spell it.

"Bread can be very individualistic," Kouris said. For instance, in Italy, where the cuisine varies from region to region—and often from town to town—all the bakers add their own little flair: a different mill of wheat, some cornmeal or other grain, sunflower seeds. "If you go to France and want a traditional *pain au levain* or a *pain de campagne* or a rustic or a baguette or *batard*, you're going to find it very similar to what we're producing."

This adherence to tradition is also one of the reasons that he initially shied away from making bagels—"To make them the right way is such a

supermarket eventually moved on when his interest in rejuvenating America's bread culture ran up against the limitations of supermarket retailing. He looked back to the Old World for guidance and inspiration, and eventually found his calling replicating traditional European breads at Blue Duck Bakery and Café in Southampton.

"We are classic," said Keith Kouris, the visionary baker. "Classic breads from Europe. This is bread you might find every day in Italy or France or Germany. We do lighter Italian breads in the summer and heavier German breads in the wintertime."

Blue Duck itself commands some claim to history, since this building on Hampton Road, just off of Main Street in Southampton, has been a bakery since the 1930s. The shop's Fortuna divider-rounder and Diosna dough mixer are ancient machines with big red buttons, arrows, levers and dials rescued from other bakeries that look like they belong in a bad sci-fi flick.

And whereas many American bakers, even artisanal bakers, will use one dough to make four or five different types of bread, Kouris designates particular mixtures of flour and yeast for particular breads. In summer that means nearly 2,000 pounds of dough in

**Opposite:** Keith Kouris still feels most comfortable working with dough. **Above:** The cookie and pastry case always includes the signature blue ducks. **Below:** Rounds of dough rest in bowls before being slid into the hearth.



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process. There's a reason there are bagel bakeries." As a concession to bagel-craving customers, Blue Duck hand-rolls bagels, but then hearth-bakes them, instead of the more demanding boiling. "What you won't find me doing is taking a rustic and rolling it out and putting cheese in it and onions on top," said Kouris. "Not that it wouldn't taste good. For me it's just not a classic."

Kouris still likes to experiment with different fermentation times, levels of acidity, and sourness. "Bread-making is a lot like wine-making," Kouris continued. "The secret to good bread is fermentation. The longer you can ferment the batter, the sweeter, nuttier, more nuanced the bread."

At Blue Duck, this is a 12- to 15-hour process that begins the day before the bread will be sold. (Demand is so high that Kouris now cooks around the clock in two shifts.) Around 8 a.m., the day shift begins to mix up the assorted doughs, a process that takes several hours and ends with placing the breads in a retarder, a glass-doored closet that keeps the breads at between 75 and 80° Fahrenheit and allows the baker to watch the rising progress inside. Different doughs are mixed throughout the morning and then put aside, often to sit until the next morning. By midnight, the night shift arrives to bake the first batch of breads and continues to reload the massive hearth oven with its stone-lined decks until dawn, when the outgoing night shift and incoming day shift pass in the twilight and the process starts all over again. Kouris himself might be here at any given time, and sometimes for the majority of a 24-hour period.

As employees ferry trays of bread in various stages past him, Kouris is clearly chomping at the bit. He eventually decides to continue the interview with his hands in the dough, moving behind the big stone kneading counter to start chopping a massive mound of dough into half-kilogram pieces to make batards. "When you're good, you can lump it in one cut," said Kouris, as he tosses the smaller pieces onto a cast-iron scale he inherited from the first bakery he owned in Huntington.

As he kneads and cuts and occasionally sprinkles flour to lubricate the kneading surface, he admits, "I was always a bread eater. I got my first taste from Brooklyn-raised Italian craftsmen."

Kouris's formal education started about 20 years ago, when, as a 19-year-old, he started delivering Queens-based Bella Chico bread in the Hamptons, a route that started in Shirley and ended in Montauk. Saving his money, he bought a deli in Huntington with a Scottish bakery in the back, complete with a 70-year-old baker, who taught Kouris "the work ethic of a baker, and how to work smart so you don't tire yourself out physically." Kouris eventually got the job managing King Kullen's flagship store in Bridgehampton, a position that allowed him to explore the art and science of bread-making on a small and large scale. (Although he estimates that Blue Duck now makes more bread than the Bridgehampton supermarket.) With higher aspirations in mind, Kouris attended the French Culinary Institute for bread-making and eventually left King Kullen to find his own space at the current Blue Duck location in Southampton.

The first week, a fire in the bread oven delayed the opening for about a month and stretched Kouris's already thin finances. But the

next half year was like a mini-revolution as Kouris refined his formulations for the particular moisture levels and qualities of the bakery's air and water. Bread is a living thing after all. And as bakers in coastal Europe have known for centuries, Kouris suspects there is something special about bread on the East End. "In Southampton, maybe the Hamptons in general, because we're so close to the water, there seems to be a lot of activity with the cultures and they grow very strong," he said, referring to the mixture of flour, water and airborne yeast that helps give bread its texture and flavor. "I think it really adds to the flavor. I'm not sure we'd get that up in the middle of the Island."

As his bread became more popular and Kouris began to wholesale it to restaurants, farm stands and gourmet stores, Blue Duck has become more than just a bakery.

Blue Duck is a popular fixture at the Sag Harbor Farmers Market, where customers look for its seasonal fruit pies and breads to serve as a palette for pesto and cheese and tomatoes purchased at the market. In order to complement the pastries and coffee that draw in the breakfast and brunch crowd, the bakery has added an impressive selection

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of savories for lunch, including sandwiches and paninis, quiches, homemade soups, ancillary products that show the same careful pairing of ingredients as the baked goods.

In the fall, Kouris and his team will make five or six wedding cakes each weekend. In October, they put the finishing touches on thousands of Halloween muffins and cookies. In late November, they're whipping up stollen and fruitcake for Thanksgiving. A few weeks later, they'll be juggling cookies shaped like angels, snowmen, snowflakes, and small and large gingerbread folk, all hand-cut and hand-decorated.

But Kouris's biggest challenge might be educating customers. Bakers everywhere are still reeling from stubborn carb-phobia. "Bread doesn't make you fat," said Kouris. "Eating too much of anything makes you fat." In this sense, Blue Duck's products hold another nutritional advantage. "Our breads are all complex carbohydrates because of the really long fermentation times," he said, noting that yeast first gobbles up any simple sugars, the kind that takes the greatest toll on our bodies. Some of Blue Duck's most popular offerings are its seed-topped sunflower bread, its square-shaped, hearty cereal bread, and a bread made from spelt flour for those trying to abstain from wheat or wheat gluten.

This interest in educating people resonates with Kouris's broader business vision. "I don't want to be Tomcat," he said, referring to the now widely distributed New York bread brand. "I plan to build more of a community life." □