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responding to trends

Innovations in tech, grab-and-go and collaboration are reaping benefits.

by John Unrein, *bake*

THE RETAIL BAKERS OF AMERICA reminds us that National Bakery Day is approaching on Sept. 30, when our industry is encouraged to promote the message, “Keep your dough local.”

Newly released Culinary Visions consumer research with more than 2,000 consumers nationwide suggests restaurants that explored new business models to keep their patrons nourished and connected during the pandemic are reaping benefits in the new post pandemic culture. The study was inspired by restaurants that found inventive ways to stay connected with their customers while keeping their businesses alive.

Of note, 76% of consumers surveyed considered themselves adventurous eaters. This sense of adventure appeals both at home and in restaurants. Eighty-four percent said they enjoy being creative with ingredients in the kitchen.

Retail bakeries across the country are responding to current consumer trends in the marketplace.

Partner and head baker Avery Ruzicka announced the spring 2022 opening of Manresa Bread in Palo Alto’s Town & Country Village, joining existing outposts in Los Gatos, Los Altos and Campbell, Calif., and featuring new menu items and grab-and-go offerings.

The 1,680-square-foot space allows customers to feel like they are walking into Ruzicka’s personal kitchen. The art of baking is on full display with as much visibility into the bread-making process possible throughout the space.

Designed by local Bay Area-firm Arcsine

Architecture and Design, the Palo Alto bakery is open for takeaway daily from 8 a.m.-6 p.m. (or until sold out), with a menu including Ruzicka’s beloved house-milled sourdough breads, laminated pastries, entremets, quiches, sandwiches, seasonal salads, and a robust coffee and tea menu. Manresa Bread merchandise, at-home baking kits and curated retail selections round out the offerings. Guests are encouraged to pre-order in advance for same-day pick-up to avoid the disappointment of arriving to find their favorite croissant sold out.

“We just made 6,000 kouign-amann in a month. It is wild to think this is our seventh year. The last two years have flown by,” Ruzicka says. “Every year is such a huge learning experience, and we learn different kinds of lessons.”

The opening is a return to Palo Alto, as Manresa Bread began selling bread at the California Avenue Farmers’ Market in 2013, cultivating a local following for Ruzicka’s loaves made with natural fermentation and house-milled, predominately local grains. The pandemic brought that to a close, and now Ruzicka celebrates welcoming those customers back.

“We’ve always had a soft spot for our regulars in Palo Alto who showed up at the farmers’ market week-after-week reaffirming their support for our thoughtful and specialized bread-making,” says Ruzicka. “We’ve been waiting for the right space to open a brick-and-mortar bakery, and we are excited to be a part of Town & Country Village and the newest wave of retail outposts coming to this legacy destination.”

Elaborate sandwiches are a widely popular feature at Manresa Bread’s newest location in Palo Alto, Calif.



Online expansion

Innovative retailers are also experiencing unprecedented growth in demand for fresh foods, including bakery. On the technology front, Amazon announced Buy with Prime, a new benefit for Prime members that will extend the convenience of Prime shopping to online stores beyond *Amazon.com*. Buy with Prime will initially be available by invitation only for merchants using Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA) and will roll out through 2022 as merchants are invited to participate, including those not selling on Amazon or using FBA.

Buy with Prime will allow millions of US-based Prime members to shop directly from merchants' online stores with the trusted experience they expect from Amazon — including fast, free delivery, a seamless checkout experience and free returns on eligible orders.

Local connections

Hard times require imaginative thinking. Kelsey Munger, owner of Lavender Bee Baking Co., at Monumental Market in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston, started baking in 2017. Like

her, current business partner Javier Amador-Pena owned a separate business, El Colombiano Coffee. Both got their beginnings selling their products at local farmers' markets. They each owned their own business but found that their products and their passion for their work complemented each other perfectly. When it was time to grow and expand, they came together and hatched the idea for Monumental Market.

"We started talking: What if we opened a space together?" Munger recalls.

It made sense. Construction and rent can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, not to mention the labor costs of staff. If this would work, cooperation and camaraderie were essential.

"It's all blended, and we each have fun with our concepts," Munger explains. "It's kind of a farmers' market vibe with one POS transaction. We're in 900 square feet of space, for retail and production."

Ode to the past

At Blue Jay Bistro, the female-led restaurant in Littleton, NC, Chef Ashleigh Fleming leads the charge, crafting the menu as an ode to her childhood, while celebrating North Carolina through locally and regionally sourced ingredients and surrounding Southern influence. The restaurant's pastry chef Brittany Elmore recently created and introduced the Pumpkin Churro to the menu — a fun, seasonal spin on the classic Spanish pastry.

"I think the key to our menu development is our culinary team. We have a small core group in the kitchen that has a really diverse professional background with very different flavor profile preferences and past experiences that we are pulling from," Fleming says. "We all work together — so someone comes up with an idea and then usually a couple of us tag team it, pass it back and forth with different components and plating, and come up with something we are proud of. Every dish is kind of collaborative."

Elmore continues to find inspiration within the hometown she grew up in — taking classically southern desserts she was raised with and recreating them utilizing simple and delicious ingredients in an elevated, fun new way. ●

Manresa Bread introduces a new baguette-at-home baking kit for avid bread customers.

Pastry chef Brittany Elmore of Blue Jay Bistro takes classically Southern desserts and recreates them in an elevated, fun new way.

