

FOOD ARTS

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Ducasse's Big Bash

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JUST LIKE *Paris*

Meryle Evans discovers a trans-Atlantic flight is no longer necessary since the arrival of revered French baker Eric Kayser on Manhattan's Upper East Side.



"What we want is crusty," says French master baker **Eric Kayser**, breaking open a fragrant fresh-from-the-oven baguette at **Maison Kayser**, his recently opened, perpetually packed, boulangerie/cafe on Third Avenue and 74th Street in Manhattan. Seated at a rear table adjacent to the large windowed kitchen in the 100 seat cafe, the first American outpost of over 80 Maison Kayser around the globe, he delights in analyzing the qualities of the ideal baguette. "The color," Kayser continues, "should not be white, not yellow, but cream." He points to the holes in the crumb, varying between large and small. They indicate the high quality of the levain, the natural leavening

that provides much of the bread's flavor, a result of a 12 hour fermentation in a machine that Kayser developed in 1994. "Sniff the bread to inhale the subtle aromas, then put it to your ear, squeeze, and listen for a crackle," he suggests, before tearing off chunks to taste the light, chewy, tender loaf.

The sandy-haired 48 year old Kayser—affable, earnest, and enthusiastic—wants everyone to share his passion for perfect baguettes—as well as quintessential flaky and buttery croissants, ambrosial pastries, and an array of other irresistible breads that are offered seasonally. How did this fourth generation baker from Haute-Saône



French master baker Eric Kayser (opposite) enters the warm embrace of the Big Apple with his prestigious, ancestral bread recipes. Photos by Thai Toutain.



Above: Bread fills the shelves behind the pastry display. Left: One of Yann Ledoux's seasonal loaves is *pain au curcuma*, a deep yellow turmeric loaf dotted with hazelnuts and walnuts.

make the leap from a bakery he opened on Rue Monge in Paris in 1996 to 21 Eric Kayser shops in the French capital and a network of sibling stores throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that consistently win top honors for artisan baking?

A familial jump-start, and the traditional apprenticeship at 15, were followed at age 19 by a life-altering experience: living a communal life for five years as a Companion of the Tour de France, an elite organization of craftsmen who travel throughout the country teaching their skills. "Living together with many people, sharing the same room was difficult," he admits, "but it was good discipline" and the training paid off.

Then, a 10 year stint followed; teaching at the prestigious National Academy of Baking and Pastry in Normandy, when Kayser and a colleague, Patrick Castagna, developed the Fermentolevain, a machine that maintains natural liquid levain at an ideal temperature, with water and flour added daily. Looking back to his youth, Kayser recalls, "We worked very hard, 16 hours a day. But bakers want to have some normal life. We needed help with good equipment, so we started with the machine," now manufactured by several companies.

For Kayser, a born teacher as well as an entrepreneur, staff training is a vital part of his business. A veritable United Nations of bakers from his far-flung boulangeries—Russia to Senegal to South Korea—converge in France for hands-on practice. **Lisa Kirschner**, a CIA graduate hired for the New York City store, spent three months in Paris before donning the baguette-colored company T-shirt on 74th Street to work with executive master baker **Yann Ledoux**. Originally from Normandy, Ledoux, an award winner for decorative bread sculpture, has been with Kayser since 2006. Before relocating to Manhattan this year, he managed 20 of the firm's bakeries and spent two years opening branches in Dubai, where he had to adapt recipes to local products and tastes. Challenges in New York City? Absolutely, says

Ledoux, citing the quest for the right American organic flour and a search for local butter to replace \$20-a-kilo (\$9-per-pound) French brands. “There are 13 cents’ worth of butter in each croissant,” Kayser estimates, “so that’s important.” Now, just two products are imported—praline for the pink praline brioche and the very finely ground, toasted corn flour, *gaude*, used in several breads, including cheese, walnut, and fig.

Kayser insists that his bakeries are not a chain. Each reflects a neighborhood, city, or country, and has its own signature specialty. For Manhattan, Ledoux came up with the corn-stalk shaped Epi East Side that breaks apart easily into individual rolls. He has also introduced a revolving selection of seasonal loaves, including pumpkin with pumpkin seeds, honey, and olive oil; cinnamon/apple with maple syrup and golden raisins; and the deep yellow turmeric dotted with hazelnuts and walnuts.

The breads are rushed out of the kitchen into the bakery throughout the day, filling shelves behind counters that showcase viennoiseries and alluring éclairs, fruit tarts, *financiers*, and gâteaux St. Honorés. The pâtisserie is made in a dedicated kitchen in the basement, the domain of executive pastry chef **Nicolas Chevrieux**.

The cafe, to the left of the bakery and a free-standing marble coffee bar, has an oak floor imported from Europe, bistro tables and banquettes, and walls embellished with old magazine covers, postcards, and other French flea market finds. The décor is the work of interior designer Caroline Egasse, who is the wife of **Louis-Jean Egasse**, CEO of **Maison Kayser USA**.

The menu features breakfast fare like egg, artichoke, and smoked salmon tartines and, throughout the day, classics such as *frisée aux lardons*, *brandade de morue*, assorted quiches and croques, and substantial entrées including *poulet au citron confit* (roasted organic chicken with light lemon confit and zucchini), and *cocottes de navarin d’agneau* (lamb stew with aromatic root vegetables). A sampling of slices of the various pains du jour is presented in a burlap sack on each table.

What about competition with other neighborhood artisanal bakeries—**Eli’s**, **Orwashers**, **Corrado**—and now, a new **Pavard** across the street specializing in fine pastries? According to Kayser, New York City needs more bakeries to measure up to Paris, where there are “two, every 100 meters (330 feet).” So, another couple of Manhattan Maison Kayser’s are opening in February. The store at 921 Broadway will also have a cafe, while at Bryant Park the plan is grab-and-go. The peripatetic Kayser, constantly on the move, checks in monthly for consultations with the staff. “I’m so happy here in New York,” he declares, “I run at 7:30 with the chefs, and then come back for coffee.”

Meryle Evans is a New York City-based food historian and food and travel writer.

Top to bottom: The cafe at the New York City flagship. Pistachio *financiers* from the pastry kitchen of Nicolas Chevrieux. Photo by Thai Toutain. An assortment of rolls made from Kayser’s liquid levain.

