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Precious Perishable

The Role of the Baguette

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By RALPH GARDNER JR.



Kevin Hagen for The Wall Street Journal

Chef Yann Ledoux removes from the oven a batch of Eric Kayser's signature baguette, the Baguette Monge, at Maison Kayser.

As delicious as it was, I did not experience Bien Cuit bakery's celebrated baguette under ideal circumstances.

I schlepped all the way out to Brooklyn—and not scenic, hipster Brooklyn, but some alley in Sunset Park at the end of which stands the bakery's new warehouse—and it was already lunchtime when I got home with the bread, which had a dark, spectacularly crunchy crust. I'll address the baguette's role as classic lunch fare momentarily. But for now, let's stick to breakfast.





Enlarge Image

Kevin Hagen for The Wall Street Journal

Sous-chef Lisa Kirschner works on Maison Kayser baguettes.

So what would constitute the ideal circumstances under which to enjoy a breakfast baguette? For starters, you'd be in Paris. I know that sounds pretentious, and probably is, but discoursing on the proper baguette in the first place is an exercise in pretension.

Of course, Parisian baguettes aren't what they used to be. Depending on where you shop, they can be mass-

produced, or at least taste that way. But at their best, few compare to the Parisian baguette, and I think I know why. It goes beyond the ingredients and the creamy French butter.

Paris is a pedestrian's city, filled with bakeries and specialty food shops. And the best way to purchase a baguette—which, depending on the weather, has a shelf life of anywhere from four to eight hours, if that (by the way, I'm not an expert, just an impassioned consumer, so feel free to substitute your own opinions and experiences)—is to pick it up as close to home as possible, preferably fresh from the oven.



Enlarge Image

Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal

The Bien Cuit baguette

"They'll gnaw off the end piece" in the bakery, said Zach Golper, Bien Cuit's owner and baker, considering that act the ultimate accolade a customer can offer his baguette. ("Bon Appétit" named it one of the nation's top 10, the only in the New York City area to make the list.) "That says people are excited about what they're eating, or hungry."

I typically buy my baguette—certainly not every day; on average once a week—at Pain Quotidian on the way back from a morning run. It's a good, hearty baguette, but not the classic Parisian version. The crust seems thicker, the bread inside a bit more substantial.

I have to tell the salesperson not to double bag it, as they normally do—one bag from the top, the other from the bottom so that the entire loaf is protected (from what I'm not sure). I'm not as undisciplined as Mr. Golper's customers, who can't wait to rip off a piece. But I like to pause at least once on my way home to breathe in the aroma.

There's something about the smell of freshly baked bread that penetrates deep into the soul. It's different from other food aromas that may trigger your hunger and spark your salivary glands. It's as if the fresh-bread smell is stimulating your memory as well, a half-dozen associations going all the way back to childhood that you can't quite put your finger on.

Mr. Golper, who owns *Bien Cuit* with his wife and business partner, the aptly named Kate Wheatcroft, and has two retail locations—one in Boerum Hill, the other on Christopher Street in the West Village—tried to explain what makes their baguettes special. (For the record, it has something to do with using a sourdough starter and letting it ferment for up to 72 hours.)

But as he shared his recipe—which he developed while apprenticing under top bakers in the U.S. and France—I realized something important: I had trouble paying attention because I didn't care.

Nothing against Mr. Golper, it's just that the joy of a baguette boils down to intuition. You know a great one as soon as it hits your teeth and tongue. It's a tactile event. There's also something breathtakingly ephemeral about it, few things being as disappointing and boring as a day-old baguette. In the same way that part of what makes life cherished is that it comes with a time limit, so the preciousness of a baguette owes something to the knowledge of its perishability. The experience is as much about our individual capacity for pleasure as it is about manipulating flour and water.

It was with that realization that I did something totally uncharacteristic for me prior to writing this. Instead, of pouring a cup of coffee, getting back in bed, shutting the door and knocking out a first draft of the column, my sense of responsibility forced me to score a fresh baguette before I could address the subject.

I'd heard good things about *Maison Kayser's* baguettes. But at Third Avenue and 74th Street, they're slightly outside my acceptable range for purchasing baked breakfast goods, which I'd place at a maximum of four blocks. Nonetheless, if I was being true to my word, and to a column on a subject this important, I realized I had no choice but to delay my workday until I experienced what was said to be the best, freshest baguette in the neighborhood. (Eric Ripert, the chef at *Le Bernardin*, recently made *Maison Kayser* his bread supplier, and I'm willing to defer to his judgment.)

Surprisingly, when I arrived at the store by 7:30 a.m., there was no line out the door, as I would have expected. In the same way that you wouldn't just sit there if you found a gold vein on your property, I didn't understand the lack of excitement.

Perhaps I just beat the morning rush?

And the baguette was still warm. When was the last time I had a warm baguette? Maybe never.

The right thing to do would probably have been to bite off a piece, as Mr. Golper and Ms. Wheatcroft's hedonistic customers do. But I'm not that kind of person. Besides, for me a baguette is almost as much about the butter and jam as it is about the bread.

I got it home and applied some extra-creamy butter that Mr. Golper had generously included with his baguette and an excellent Trinquelinette raspberry jam from Fairway.

Were I to be true to my first childhood memories of tasting a baguette—it was probably in a basket of breakfast pastries at the Gallia, an ancient hotel just off the Champs Elysees that's long gone—I'd have held out until I could have secured strawberry jam. But raspberry jam would have to do.

The baguette was as delightful as I could have desired—the crust simultaneously crusty and chewy, the bread inside as light, fluffy and substantial as a cloud.

And the best part of it is that I had half of it left for lunch. "The perfect combination," Mr. Golper said, based upon his time in France, "a little slathering of butter and a slice of ham. Oh my god!"

I'd agree.

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