

In Magog

# Bakers teach meaning of *le pain chante*

by Richard Creaser

MAGOG, Quebec — *Le pain chante*. Literally translated “the bread sings” seems a whimsical and purposeless phrase. Coupled with the sight of three-kilogram loaves fresh out of the oven and the heady smell of that most blessed union of yeast and flour, the phrase takes on an entirely new meaning.

If you listen closely, the crackling of the browned crust plays out its own wondrous symphony. Shocked by the relative coolness of the air outside of the oven, the bread responds by crackling and popping, creating the song of the bread.

It is a song well known to veteran restaurateurs Agnès Castilloux and Denis Mareuge, owners of Owl's Bread Bakery in Mansonville, Quebec, and their newest location in downtown Magog. Bread's siren song has played for the pair for the last 13 years, ever since they first opened shop in Mansonville.

“We opened our first store with \$12,000, it was the price of a Cavalier at the time, and a \$35,000 loan from the Centre d'Aide aux Enterprise,” Mr. Mareuge told a small crowd of well-wishers at the Magog location's grand opening February 28.

From their Mansonville location the couple produced exquisite breads and savory meat products like their foie gras and smoked salmon. As Louise Paradis of the Centre d'Aide aux Enterprise Memphrémagog said, the location

quickly gained a reputation well outside of its area.

“We have a quality clientele but, sadly, they are not there every day,” Mr. Mareuge said of the Mansonville location.

In order to sustain growth and increase Owl's Bread's presence, the couple decided to expand their business. The result was a brand-new building in downtown Magog with a state-of-the-art bakery and a decidedly European-themed storefront and bistro eatery.

The Magog location now serves as the principal bakery, providing bread for both locations. The Mansonville operation continues to serve as the main kitchen, producing specialty foods and serving as a weekend supper restaurant. Both facilities offer lunches.

There is an uncommon passion in Mr. Mareuge for his bread. He is fully committed to preserving ancient bread-making techniques and insists on pure, quality ingredients for his baked goods. For instance, he disdains the use of bleached flour, preferring to use unbleached flour that contains natural yeasts. He also avoids adding fat or sugar into his products.

“There is a lot of butter in the croissants,” he admits. “But it helps them go down.”

He is also a champion of locally grown and produced foods. Last year alone Owl's Bread consumed four metric tons of butter and used 2,000 liters of cream. The

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Denis Mareuge leads visitors on a grand tour of Owl's Bread's newest location in Magog. Mr. Mareuge and co-owner Agnès Castilloux founded the original Owl's Bread Bakery in Mansonville, Quebec, just a few minutes north of the border from the North Troy U.S. Customs station. Photo by Richard Creaser

In Magog

# Owl's Bread produces an exquisite foie gras

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restaurant and bakery maintain close ties with Lake Brome Ducks and Highwater Deer Farm and partnerships with Quebec vintners like Le Cep d'Argent.

Owl's Bread received help on its latest expansion from the Development Bank of Canada. The key to securing support from France de Gaspé-Beaubien and this federal agency rested on a simple fact, said Mr. Mareuge.

"She knew we liked to make good things," he said.

His keen understanding of economic theory no doubt fuels Mr. Mareuge's championing of buying local. In expanding his business Mr. Mareuge has created additional good-paying jobs, jobs that cannot be outsourced to China, he added.

"You don't want someone getting paid minimum wage to work with a \$60,000 oven," he said. "You want a skilled professional, and you have to pay that professional a good wage."

By his own estimation, if everyone in Magog were to purchase a single loaf of bread from his bakery once a week it could fuel the development of as many as three other bakeries in town. That's three bakeries beyond his own, he said.

"Wouldn't that be better than buying bread made who knows where by who knows who?" Mr. Mareuge said.

Though bread might be Owl's Bread's signature creation, there is certainly plenty of other delicious food to sing about as well. The company produces an exquisite foie gras, a rich, buttery paste created from goose liver. It also has a line of rillettes, meats cooked down in their own juices.

With a choice ranging from duck to rabbit, the rillettes provide a sensory sensation that is only magnified by its being served on slices of Owl's Bread's fresh artisan bread. Slightly salty to the taste, the predominant flavor is nonetheless the meat itself. The flavors are sharp and distinct and yet without any of the unpleasant gamey flavor often attributed to rabbit or duck.

Equally exquisite is Mr. Mareuge's smoked salmon. Sometimes called the "king of fish," salmon has a decidedly bold flavor profile. Sometimes ferrous, often fatty, it is these characteristics that cause some connoisseurs to shy away from this delicacy.

At some point between filleting, hanging in the smokehouse, and finding its way to the dinner



Baker Marc Gregoire removes a three-kilogram loaf from the oven at Owl's Bread Bakery's new location in Magog, Quebec. Though the Magog location will serve as the primary bakery for both Owl's Bread locations, the original Mansonville shop will continue to serve as a dining place and the source of Owl's Bread's exquisite pâtés, smoked salmon, and foie gras.

Photo by Richard Creaser

table, Mr. Mareuge has banished those distasteful elements replacing them with a smooth, beautifully textured piece of meat. The smokiness is light, not cloying, and is enhanced by the addition of a sprig of fresh herb to the tasting.

If Mr. Mareuge's wish comes true and bakeries begin to sprout in the Eastern Townships, it is difficult to imagine a negative side to that proliferation. The greatest hardship foodies would face would be where and what we should eat next.



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