

**Graham Pritchard**

**Artisan Baker**

### **Companion Bakery Oatlands**

1900 words

'There is', suggests Graham Pritchard, artisan baker, 'no end to what you *could* be doing'. And he looks up from fifteen round mounds of dough on the stainless steel island bench, alongside the brick wood-fired oven. 'You could be out there, non-stop researching, trying to figure it all out'. He picks up the first mound of dough, folds it into a nappy shape, and over again. Then he rolls it out into a log, turns it over a few times in a tray of flour, before dropping it into a rectangular metal tray. All this takes about fifteen seconds. 'Or', he says, picking up the thread of our conversation, 'you can let your hands figure it out for you, without even knowing that's what you're doing. I find working with dough, once you've worked out how to handle a particular batch, to be quite meditative'.

'Most people', I suggest, 'think that after a while being a baker must get boring, forever shaping mounds of wet dough into loaves. 'Ha!' he replies. 'Well, actually, what people perhaps don't realise is that every time you shape a dough you are solving a problem. Every fifteen to twenty seconds, as you fold and roll a dough, you're thinking to yourself, "How can I handle this to shape it into the ideal I am aiming for?" Mostly that's followed by the "Ahh" moment, when you realise it isn't going to work out this time. But then, for one loaf out of 20, after the same mantra goes through your mind, "How can I get this loaf to work out?" you surprise yourself with, "Oh my God, this is *perfect*". At which point you say to yourself, "How I wish I could have figured that out from the start!"'

'The general consensus about bread-making is that it's all about developing an elastic dough which is full of gas. People think that this gas is a by-product of the fermenting yeast, and that the elasticity is an effect of the gluten developing as it's stretched. But in fact', he points out, 'what you want from a good dough isn't elasticity so much as extensibility. You want the dough to condition to the point of it releasing lactic acids, which then temper the gluten and soften the dough. The dough becomes strong and elastic and, more importantly, well-conditioned and extensible.' And he says this with obvious satisfaction, as if this is the answer to a longstanding problem.

Graham Pritchard hasn't always been an artisan baker. Photography and art have also been a big part of his life. At the age of 11 his father, an electrical engineer, turned the family's laundry into a dark room in order to teach his son how to use an enlarger and to develop with photographic

chemicals. The appeal of photography, for him, is its precision, along with the need to be exact. Yes, he admits, you can experiment, especially with digital photography, but overall you can control things a lot more with photography, than you can with baking.

Unlike in big commercial bakeries where the variables (flour, temperature, rising times) are controlled and there are no surprises, in Graham's view the mark of a smaller artisan baker is that the variables colour the outcome. Fluctuations of temperature, seasonal changes in grains, even the human element – all these things play a role in the baking process and keep the artisan baker on his or her toes.

'When you make art', Graham points out, 'you may exhibit your work maybe once a year. As a result you get quite self-obsessive about it. There's a way in which you *become* your work. Whereas when you run a bakery, every day is like an exhibition. You get feedback all the time.'

A good way through his Sydney Fine Art degree, in his early twenties, Graham hit a wall. He got lazy with handing work in, and let his focus gravitate to the bakery work he was doing on the side. A lecturer took it on himself to give Graham an especially negative assessment in front of a class. At the end of the class Graham took his work out into the corridor and threw it down the stairwell - work, equipment, the lot - smashing his interest in photography for the next five years.

Instead he headed for the hills near Cooma and trained under an Australian baker, and learned a lot from the French and English bakers he was working alongside. Six months later the Australian baker moved on and Graham took over. It was during this time that a neighbour persuaded him of the need for green activism to prevent land-clearing roundabout – an awareness that has never left him. This stint was followed by further training at Demeter in Sydney – 'still the best bread in Sydney' – where Rudolf Steiner's philosophy imbued everything. 'I still remember the master baker weeping when one of the mixing machines required mineral oil to repair it'.

It was around this time that Graham was drawn back into teaching photography at university – and to Fairfax journalists shortly before the Olympics, when photography was digital. But after seven years of photography the baking bug took hold again, and he and his young family headed north to Queensland. But, somehow, the impetus to start a bakery never came. Whether it was the heat, which meant people didn't eat as much bread as they do in southern states, or something else, Graham still isn't sure.

By this point Graham had a much clearer sense of the kind of bakery he wanted to start, and a much stronger desire to do so. And so it was back in the car for their drive south. The Companion Bakery might have been born in Canberra, were it not for the 45-degree heat that blasted them as

they opened their car doors in the country's flat and dry capital – and his partner Tristan's dislike of intense heat.

The turning point for the current bakery came in the form of financial backing, tied to plans to reawaken the adjacent mill. But it was the installation of a vast brick wood-fired oven that turned promise into reality. This oven, the beating heart of the bakery which never goes out, combined with locally-ground flour and Graham's expertise, has made Companion Bakery famous - its bread selling out within a couple of hours each Sunday at Hobart's Farm Gate Market.

'What's your experience of Tasmania so far?' This was the first question that Graham was asked by locals at a welcome for Graham and his family at Oatlands Council Chambers. Never one to fudge, Graham replied, 'We really like it, but, my God, they ripped the country around here apart years ago'. A stony silence followed. Little did Graham realise, in those early days, just how sensitive this issue was for both locals and farmers. Seventeen years of drought had taken its toll on residual goodwill. The welcoming committee at the Council Chambers were hoping for regeneration of the town - a vibrant main street and the buzz of visitors en route between Hobart and Launceston - not a critique of times past.

The drought has now ended, irrigation is underway, and a wary optimism has taken hold in the town. Oatlands' locals may not be the bakery's biggest customers, but there's a recognition that the Companion Bakery – along with Casaveen Woollen Company – are vital for the town's health.

One of the most important things to know about Graham Prichard is that he loves teaching people how to make bread. He loves the step-by-step process of showing people how to do something real and tangible and life-enhancing. For him the hardest thing to convey, to people just starting out, is that the art of bread-making is flexible. 'Many people find it a real challenge not to know, ahead of time, exactly how things are going to work out'. It can be particularly hard, he explains, if you have a science background, or if you're secretly a pedant in the kitchen. In his mind confidence comes, not from knowing everything there is to know about bread-making, but from knowing 'how to enjoy the process, when you actually don't know everything technically about it. This can,' he points out, 'be an enjoyable thing to recognise. You *can* let go. You don't have to do everything the books say. You can adapt. All you really need to understand in order to make wonderful bread, is how things ferment, how dough feels when it's ready, and how hot the oven needs to be. When you've reached this point you'll know instinctively what to do - but you don't need to know at the outset'.

Baking at Oatlands has been a revelation for Graham. Rather than preaching the value of slow living, the Companion Bakery is, by its nature, a slow environment in which to work. The flour from

Callington Mill – a stone’s throw from the bakery – is ground from grain grown in fields roundabout that stays in the ground for six months before being harvested. Dough rises best in cooler temperatures, with which Oatlands is blessed for much of the year (thermals are de rigeur during winter). And the buildings in which the bakery now extends into, Georgian shopfronts flush with the street, create the right sort of aura.

But for Graham the real revelation of sourdough bread-making is more fundamental than any of these factors. ‘How,’ he asks, letting flour pour through the fingers of his upturned palm, ‘can this ridiculous *dust*’, and he pauses mid-sentence, ‘be transformed into something fully digestible and attractive to look at, just by the addition of water and salt? It’s kind of unbelievable’, he adds, as if he himself still struggles with it. ‘It’s such a restricted palette, and yet we have just enough control over it to make *amazing bread*’.

It’s quite hard to stop Graham when he’s in full flight. The passion he exudes at moments like these contrasts strongly with the tall, diffident man who greets you on first meeting. It’s as if what Graham Prichard is really about only comes to the fore when he’s immersed in the bigger picture. And yet, even loose in this heady expanse, he’s ready to come back down to the steel bench in his Oatlands bakery. ‘The secret’, he tells me in a tone of voice that elides me with a master’s apprentice, ‘is all about how much flour is in the dough. You have to know how much new and old flour is in the starter, where that flour came from and whether more gluten to increase its extensibility - all of which tells you how acidified the flour it’.

Very soon many more people will be able to encounter Graham’s teaching via the Internet. At each end of the steel counter large video cameras stand expectantly, covered in plastic hoods to protect them from plumes of flour. The Companion Bakery will go live. Learning to knead dough, to fold it like a nappy, to drop the rolled log into a tray of flour and then into an oiled tray, will soon be something you can follow from the comfort of your own kitchen. It will never take the place of his hands-on, daylong classes. But it’s clearly an important element in his mission to spread the art of sourdough bread-making to the world, all from the main street of Oatlands, bang in the middle of the Midlands. Who knows, perhaps it will catch on with the locals.