



Earning an honest crust

Michael Hanson has a passion for 'honest bread', Andrea Mynard discovers

Michael Hanson grew up with the comforting warmth of a bread oven, spending much of his childhood playing in his grandfather's bakehouse. He remembers the pungent aromas of bread and cakes, cheery bakers working around the clock; a wonderful world of bread, singing and alchemy.

The family bakery grew into a large, profitable business and Michael's early working life was involved in developing it. This was at a time when we were becoming increasingly dependent on mass-produced bread. Michael, however, was baking artisan bread before it was fashionable and, after a break

from baking, renewed his passion for 'honest bread' made with real ingredients. He went back to basics, learnt to make earth ovens and began touring the UK festival circuit with a wood-fired pizza oven.

Now the bread Michael is baking at his simple bakehouse/eaterie in Lewes is not only 'honest' but is made using methods and ingredients that were used in the Middle Ages. He's using what all bakeries used to bake and leaven their bread with until about 150 years ago: heritage flour and wild yeast in the form of barm from the brewery they were normally next door to.

In this case, the brewery (Harveys) is very traditional, family-owned, produces award-winning ales and can be seen from the bread oven. The flour is from ancient varieties of grain grown land-race style on an organic farm.

Having transformed the old greasy spoon canteen in Lewes bus station a year ago into what he calls a “hostelry with a hearth” where he bakes amazing pizzas and bread, Michael has set about making maslin and manchet bread with what he says is “the sort of flavour they would’ve had in the Middle Ages”.

At a time when many people are beginning to tire of industrially produced, plastic-wrapped bread that provides little nourishment for the

body or soul, this is wholesome, satisfying bread to be companionably shared with friends.

Michael attributes the quality of his bread to two things: baking using a proper process with “no shortcuts and no compromises”; and using good flour.

The flour used by Michael would be recognised by medieval bakers; it’s a stone-ground flour milled from heritage varieties of grain grown by John Letts in medieval land-race style (with many different types of hardy grain growing together, having evolved over time, naturally adapting to local conditions and resulting in a hardy, genetically diverse crop).

Tom the baker.





John is an archeo-botanist who comes from a farming family. His extensive research into ancient varieties of grain has led to him growing many heritage varieties of wheat organically, using all sorts of traditional agricultural equipment such as a spelt

Michael Hanson (left) at Harveys Brewery, which supplies him with wild yeast barm.

wheat dehuller and a 125-year-old threshing machine. All are pieces of kit that would have been commonplace before monoculture and high-yielding

modern varieties of grain with a high gluten content became popular. Flour from the heritage grain tends to be naturally lower in gluten than we've become used to and so can be easier to digest as well as full of flavour.

When I met Michael in Lewes, he'd just been to help John harvest the wheat. Some years ago, while having a break from baking, Michael worked as a thatcher and met John (who happens to be a skilled thatcher as well as archeo-botanist and farmer); John has also found that heritage grain makes very strong, long-lasting thatching straw.

Michael has since experimented with John's flour, using a mix of his spelt and heritage flour in his spelt loaves. The heritage flour is, according to Michael, similar to that used by medieval bakers in manchet bread. This was the preferred bread of the rich, made from sieved stoneground wheat, as opposed to the coarser mix of grains used in poor man's maslin bread.

Michael and his Hungarian baker, Tom, also enjoy experimenting with John's wholewheat flour in maslin-style loaves, delighting in the fact that it contains einkorn and rye.

Einkorn was the first type of wheat that was cultivated by Iron Age people 9,000 years ago. John found original grain from Turkey to cultivate in the UK; while another of his flours includes rivet wheat, which was originally grown in Sussex, having been brought here by the Normans.



The Hearth bakehouse.

After seeing that some of his customers found bread with a high gluten content difficult to digest, Michael thinks that bread baked with this heritage flour is “helping to foster an understanding of why individuals have had to cut back on their wheat”.

He stresses, however, that the type of wheat is just one factor. Michael teaches bread-making courses at Brook Bakery School in Somerset and says that he concentrates on teaching people about the process first, time being the vital factor:

“I tell people to make bread in five hours rather than one-and-a-half hours, and they need an awful lot of persuading. People think that it will

over-prove but if you use a quarter of the amount of yeast you can leave it to prove for longer.

“If you take five hours you’ll make a half-decent loaf; take five to ten hours and you’ll have a fantastic loaf.”

While I talked to Michael about his bread, he stoked up the fire in his bread oven (a delivery of local wood arrived while we chatted) and at 2pm his dough was already proving, ready to be baked the following morning.

His wild yeast comes from two sourdough cultures. One of the cultures has been developed from brewer’s yeast from Harveys. The ‘barm’ is the frothy part off the top of beer during brewing and as Michael explains, “brewer’s yeast was always used in baking bread up until the late 1850s.”

Michael feeds his barm culture regularly as you would a sourdough culture, and says you have to ensure it doesn’t get too acidic.

Clearly passionate about good bread made from honest ingredients, Michael feels that “eating good bread is a symbol of how you respect yourself and the Earth”.

I came away from meeting him loving the flavour and texture of his bread. While feeling that there’s also something wonderfully satisfying about the integrity of this baking process; bread with a minimum of twelve hours’ fermentation that is not only made by hand but baked in an oven that’s handmade by the baker.

Michael sees bread as a “ferment for social change”. I hope he’s right as this

Sourdough loaf with heritage flour

460g flour from heritage wheat
300g sourdough culture (if you don’t have access to wild yeast such as Michael’s brewer’s yeast)
10g sea salt
230ml cold water

Mix all the ingredients in a bowl to form a rough dough. If it feels too dry you may need to add more water — it depends on the temperature and the flour. Turn it onto a floured work surface and knead for 15 minutes until you have a soft and stretchy dough.

Put it in a bowl, cover with a damp tea towel and leave at room temperature (not in a warm place as you would a quick-rise loaf) for at least six hours. Overnight on a reasonably cool windowsill is fine.

Heat the oven (preferably a baking stone too) to 230°C and gently place your dough in a loaf shape onto the baking stone. Slash it with a sharp knife, and spray a few squirts of water from a water sprayer into the oven as you open the door.

Bake the loaf for half an hour until golden and hollow sounding when tapped underneath.

seems to be a beautifully slow, very tasty sort of revolution. ■

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