

Big Loafer Brings Back Old-Time Fancy Breads

By Rosette Hargrove
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Paris (NEA) — When Marie Antoinette said "Let them eat cake" she triggered a revolution, as every school child knows.

But maybe not for the reasons generally advanced. The good citizens may have resented her suggestion not so much because they couldn't afford cake, but because French bread is far superior to even the fanciest of baked sweets.

There was a time when it was truly the staff of life of every Frenchman, but today he is content with half a loaf.

Americans invariably comment on the sight of French workers hurrying home from work carrying their "yard of bread." This is especially true in the suburbs and rural areas. All the same, statistics show that bread consumption has dropped at least 30 per cent in the past 30 years.

The reason for this is twofold, according to master baker Marcel Sarrau. The working population enjoys a more plentiful and varied diet and the modern cult of slimming has placed bread on the taboo list.

"Of course, bread soaked in rich sauces or smeared with butter is a sure road to overweight.

"But it should not be so," said Marcel Sarrau, "and certainly crusty French bread is not as fattening as the doughy kind eaten in Anglo-Saxon countries. I consider anybody can eat from six to eight ounces of fresh bread a day without dreading the scales."

Sarrau should know what he is talking about. His family have been bakers since 1429. A native of Toulouse, he came to Paris 35 years ago and is very proud of the fact that the flour mill built by one of his ancestors in 1450 still stands.

His only hobby is the history of bread throughout the ages. He has acquired considerable knowledge as well as recipes going back to earliest breadmaking.

A few months ago he decided to hold an exhibition of the various kinds of bread which have existed since the beginning of the Christian era on to the French Revolution.

"The Renaissance was the age of the richest variety in bread-making" declared Sarrau. "At that time master bakers vied with each other to produce complicated and ornate loaves, which bore picturesque names. Then breadmaking was considered as noble a craft as that of the jeweler. Apprentices had to submit a fancy loaf to the guild jury before they could call themselves master bakers."

For his exhibition Monsieur Sarrau spent long hours turning out the loaves shaped like arti-



Marcel Sarrau baked himself a batch of old-time bread for a special display. On the top row are the "sunflower," the "still life," and one fancy hunk of bread that would be placed on the hearth to welcome a stranger. Just above the bottom row at the right is the "crown of thorns," usually baked during Holy Week.

chokes, sunflowers, elaborate "cushions" — square, round, oblong — pictures in frames imitating carved woodwork and the "crown of thorns" baked during Holy Week.

He also showed fancy "plates" made of bread used at the court of Marie de Medici on which the many courses of fish, flesh and fowl were served, accompanied by spiced sauces. After the meal these plates were distributed to the poor who gathered outside the banqueting halls.

The most ancient bread conceived by man was found in the tomb of Ramses III and goes back 2600 years B.C.

Today Sarrau bakes 15 kinds of bread daily, not counting the well-known "croissants." These were introduced to Paris by Queen Marie Antoinette who brought the recipe from Vienna some 280 years ago. The legend goes that they were initially brought back from Turkey by the first crusaders.

It was only after the French Revolution that French bakers introduced yeast into their dough instead of preparing their own leaven.

Bread is so important to some of his clients that many journey to his shop in the Saint Lazare district two and sometimes three times a day to buy fresh from

the oven.

His only son is a doctor but Marcel Sarrau says his 10-year-old grandson is interested in baking and hopes he will carry on the family tradition.

Across the river, on the Left Bank, master baker Pierre Poliane has for some time now specialized in old-fashion country bread made of stone-ground whole wheat flour leavened by natural fermentation and baked in a wood-fired stove.

Weight-conscious doctors, their patients, busy housewives and gourmets come to him to buy the golden four-pound round loaves called "tourtes" for their low-caloried, protein-free qualities as well as high nutritional value. Weight-watchers can eat it without an afterthought.

The older Poliane bread gets, the better it tastes he claims, and stored properly, it can last for 10 days. He explains that the slightly sour taste comes partly from the "natural leavening" and partly from a wood-fired oven.

Life in a Cambodian village is just one ceremony after another — puberty rites, solemn weddings, gay funerals and the like.