

LEARNING TO BAKE BREAD IN FRANCE

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Dave, a tall, flame haired Scotsman taught me to make bread. He shared a house with my future husband and on the nights after their frequent parties, the house reverberated with the thump thump as Dave made bread.

We moved to Bedfordshire and discovered we could buy sacks of flour from Jordan's, now known for their cereal rather than flour.

I continued to make bread. Always in a tin, always wholemeal. As I made my own, I was largely unaware of what else was available—except for the baguettes we relished on our trips to France.

Thinking I knew about bread, I decided to extend my skills and take a croissant making class at [The Bertinet Kitchen](#).

That's when I first saw Richard Bertinet's way of manipulating the dough: he folded air into the dough rather than thumping it out.

I made bread
for friends – and
soon thought:
"What's next?"

Baking at home, I had continued to thump the hell out of my bread, and discovering that there was a different way to knead was astonishing. It was as if I had been riding a bike the wrong way all those years. On this course, we had

but a glance at Richard's technique, but I was hooked.

I loved the way Richard taught: no compromises, you need to work hard at it, and so I saved up to attend his five day course. Having mastered the basics, we tried breads from France and Italy. It was only on the fourth day that we made sourdough, as he felt we'd got to grips with his dough manipulation technique. During the course, I learnt so much and made some firm friends. Afterwards, we would email each other about our attempts to create a burst at home.

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Curiously, as an adult in the UK it is difficult, almost impossible to find a long term advanced class in bread making. The school of Artisan Food now offers one — at £18,000 per year!

Whilst I searched, I decided to find out whether I was up to the rigours of bread making on a large scale. In the end, I discovered several places in France through [WWOOF](http://www.woof.net), [World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms](http://www.woof.net).

I found a small bakery in Normandy that was prepared to take me on for a short duration, and so I headed off to Boulangerie les Co'Pains¹, an organic bakery where everything is made by hand and most of the bread sold at markets in Caen, Lisieux and Honfleur.

I helped the bakers with every stage of the bread making process as well as selling the bread on the markets.

I hadn't quite appreciated what they meant by making everything by hand until I got there. This was baking as it had been years ago: Huge wooden troughs were filled with flour, bread dough mixed 20 kilos at a time, left to prove, then baked in a wood fired oven.

There was not one piece of electrical equipment in the bakery!

The bulk of the bread was prepared late afternoon. It was actually a lot easier to manipulate than you might think, and getting stuck into the dough—which was all levain based—was rather wonderful. The dough was left to prove overnight. At 4 A.M. the fire was lit and shaping began. With three different bakers, each with a slightly different way of doing things, it was often quite challenging to follow instructions. I struggled with reaching the shelves and never attempted to chop the wood, which was the last chore each baking day.

We made a bread with many different flours including spelt, rye and the particularly tricky einkorn, some finished with nuts or seeds. We

¹ Coincidentally, after deciding on the bakery, I found [this article about them on the Farine blog](#).



WORLDWIDE OPPORTUNITIES ON ORGANIC FARMS (WWOOF)

WWOOF enables volunteers to spend time helping their hosts in various ways. The organization came into being originally in the UK in 1971.

Hosts who may have a farm, smallholding, vineyard or cooperative or similar, open their homes to WWOOFers (or volunteers) who provide an extra pair of hands to help with a large range of projects. In return, the volunteer is provided with accommodation and meals and a fantastic insight into how organic produce is made.

Most visits are for around 2 weeks but they can also be a lot longer. To participate, you pay a small fee to the WWOOF organisation in the country you are interested in. That lets you access their listing and get in touch with prospective hosts.

→ Visit www.woof.net for more information.



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BOULANGERIE LES CO'PAINS

Boulangerie Les Co'pains is situated in Aubin sur Algot, near Cambremer village in the Pays d'Auge, Normandy.

The bakery was set up by Erik Klaasen, who hails from the Netherlands, the bakery is run as a co-operative creating breads made from levain and organic flour. All breads are kneaded by hand and baked in a wood fired oven in what was formerly an ancient mill house.

In addition to selling at markets, the Boulangerie participates in an organic box scheme and supplies local schools with bread.

Throughout the summer, large numbers of school parties are welcomed. The children from as young as five discover and actively participate in bread making to give them an idea of what the craft of a baker entails.

→ The bakers at Boulangerie Les Co'pains have published a small book about their bread and baking operations, called Boulange.

[Read the book for free at Issuu.](#)

made brioche and some biscuits that were particularly popular with the children. Most of the loaves were made in tins.

The wood fired oven needed to be looked after. Each night, logs are stacked in the oven to dry out. The next morning they are moved into the fire itself below. When the oven has reached temperature, the breads are baked in the residual heat.

Selling the breads on the market was amazing. Having created huge number of loaves, we'd head to that day's market and set up. The camaraderie of the stall holders was amazing and it was gratifying to hear the customers praise the bread we'd made. I speak French well, but trying to add up and make change proved tricky, let alone differentiate between the coins. But all in all I proved to myself I could cope with the physical side and was raring to go.



Back home, while creating a list of artisan bakeries in Edinburgh for my blog, edinburghfoody.com, I got to know Katia Lebart who runs the [Wee Boulangerie](#). She explained that she had returned to her native France eight years previously to retrain as a baker in the south west of France, one of a number of such conversion courses for adults.

I thought, why not? Living in France had always been a dream of mine. My spoken French was pretty good...

As I started looking at options, I realized that despite having a degree, I would need to prove I had sufficient skills in French and Maths. Each course required a different set of details. So many hoops to jump through.

Luckily, just as I had signed up for an advanced course at the French Institute, Katia told me that [Banette](#)—a company owned by a group of flour millers—were opening



up their course to overseas participants. For this course, I wouldn't need to take the extra French or Maths or prove my fluency level.

Perfect.

Banette was founded in the early 1980s by a group of millers who wanted to make sure the effort they put in making the flour is translated into a great bread.

To attain this goal, Banette has created a unique training program in which they train bakers at their school, Ecole Banette. In return, the bakers agree to use the Banette flour and follow their recipes for a minimum of three years. Today, there are around 3000 independently owned Banette bakeries in France.

Ecole Banette is located in Briare, in the Loiret in Central France, really miles from anywhere. The closest airport to return home was Charles de Gaulle, 2.5 hours away. An astonishing 12 sessions are taught each year. Some

courses are for continuing professional development, but most are for training bakers to set up their own bakeries in a short time.

In France, bakeries are usually run by couples—he runs the bakery whilst she runs the sales side, it's very unusual to have women running the bakery—so there was an assumption that you'd have a partner who would learn the merchandising whilst you learnt to bake.

The course consists of two parts, each two months long: *Initiation* (I will keep the French word) and *Perfectioning*. Then, as the school is closed in August, that month was meant for getting some work experience.

I really wouldn't advise returning from holiday in Japan, getting on a ferry across the North Sea and driving down through France within 48 hours, but that is what I had to do. The holiday had been booked before the course confirmed.

I arrived late (of course), to discover that rather than ten pupils in a session, there would just be three of us. It was only two months later when another group started that I realised how much we lost out, not being paired up with someone else to share the challenges.

The first couple of weeks were a blur. I'd not enjoyed the communal living in Normandy and knew I'd need to avoid the student accommodation. The place I'd chosen to rent so carefully turned out to be no more than a bedsit in a very old building.

So, I told the rental agent that the place wasn't good enough, but resigned myself to not being able to move. Car boot sales (of which there were many) were raided for kitchen equipment and I got to grips with the local launderette.

At the school, we had use of a large room, a bench each, a spiral and a planetary mixer, and the share of two large ovens. Next to the bench was a *Parisienne*—a cupboard with evenly spaced shelves on which we rested the bread. Flour and other supplies were kept in our workstation. Refrigeration and prover retarders were also on hand.

It was June and hot, the temperature often rising to 30°C. We settled into a routine of meeting early "au cafe"—grabbing a coffee, always on tap. I found the first few weeks confusing. Everything seemed so different from what I had learnt before. Here, you only touched the dough to shape it. Mixing was all done by machine.

We got to grips with temperature. Each recipe has a base temperature (e.g. 60°C), which is used to calculate the water temperature: we measured the air temperature and the flour temperature and subtracted them from the base temperature to work out the water temperature².

² See the article on page 66 for a more detailed discussion on temperature.

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As it was so warm, the required water temperature was frequently as cold as we could get from the tap.

On the baking front, it was very up and down. One Thursday was a real low point. I managed to bodge every single task we were given. We were asked to do “*le planning*” and schedule in six different items so that they would all be proved and baked at the right moment. Suffice to say “*le planning*” did not come naturally.

What I was finding hardest wasn’t actually the physical activity but speaking French all day – no one spoke English. After all the baking was completed, we had to go into the classroom to learn theory. It was as if I were a bucket full of water. Any more and it would overflow.

But as the course went on, after a few weeks, we were regularly making 30 baguettes at a time. We were learning to work with very wet dough and how to retard it in various ways to fit in with a baking schedule. On the home front, the letting agency came up trumps. A lady in Chatillon was going to spend the summer on her barge, so I was asked if I would like to rent her house. What a find it proved to be! A house right near the church (luckily the bells only rang from 7 am to 10 pm) with everything one could possibly need to live comfortably.

We got to grips with bakers’ percentages³ and now I wonder how I could ever do without them.

We moved onto sweet doughs (viennoiserie) and got to grips with the pastry brake. I was learning to change habits of a lifetime. I had to become much more organised, much more consistent. The pace was still a challenge. One chap excelled—he always finished first.

Having spent the time using exclusively white flour, I was eager to get onto wholemeal or rye perhaps. I was disappointed to discover

³ See [this article on our blog](#) for a detailed explanation of the bakers’ percentage.

BANETTE

Banette bakers are totally independent, but are fired by the same passion, that of a love of good bread and working as artisans. Banette, set up by a group of flour millers, provides the different flours but also the branding and merchandising of the baker at more than 300 bakeries across France. Each day, more than 3000 Banette bakers promote their passion for good bread to their customers.

The Banette bakers are supported by the millers at every step of the way from opening their business, to help with production and to eventual sale.

Banette bakers are not franchisees, they simply agree to use Banette flours and respect artisan methods established by the research centre at Banette. Ecole Banette was set up to train bakers wishing to convert from different careers and to provide continuing professional education.

→ Visit banette.fr for more information.







that we'd be using "special mixes". Designed to make a baker's life easier, these were a recipe of different flours often with salt and improvers already added. For me, as I was used to delicious tasting breads, these were a disappointment, but they seemed to appeal to the French palate.

After three weeks, we had our first theory test, which threw me into confusion. There were terms in there I had not come across before and had no idea what they meant. This was quickly followed by a change of teacher. I'd found shaping hard, and it was great to learn a different way to tackle it. On the plus side, I seemed to have got to grips with "le planning".

Before we knew it, the end of the first session loomed with its tests in theory and practice. We had to pass each of them to go onto the next stage.

The practical test was a seven hour session during which I had to create 30 banettes (300 g baguettes), 20 maxi baguettes (500 g) and 10 mini baguettes (150 g) which take quite a time to mix, pre-shape, shape and bake. In addition to them, 34 special mix loaves and 36 pains au chocolat. I wasn't happy with my performance and the results showed: I made a mistake in one recipe and should have baked some breads longer. I just scraped through.



In August, for the period the school was closed, I returned to Edinburgh to get some work experience. My first placement fell through and I spent a mad few days trying to organise another before [Breadwinner Bakery](#)—a commercial bakery run by Sean McVey, a baker who has been in the business for 50 years—took me on.

I'd left my car in France and wished every day I hadn't. A journey that would have taken ten minutes, took 45 on the bus.

This placement was a revelation and made so much difference to my success. The bakery is working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, supplying shops and restaurants all over the city. As it was festival time we were particularly busy. One day, we made 1500 croissants!

Sean is very passionate about his starters and had potato, sourdough and rye starters always on the go and endlessly called me over to watch a particular process. I really enjoyed being part of the team and soon felt part of the family.



Back in France, we moved to a different room at the school. I am sure the range of equipment would make most bakers envious. In addition to standard equipment, we had dividing machines and machines that shape baguettes. We had more provers, prover/retarders, and much larger sized spiral mixers.

This was getting serious.

Now, we were using 20 kilos of flour at a time, making many different breads each day and making full use of the equipment to prove overnight at 8°C, then putting the bread straight in the oven, which we hopefully had remembered to program to turn on two hours earlier. No longer were the teachers turning ovens and equipment on for us and reminding us of the next step.

Having agonised over getting the baguettes shaped just right, now it was just a matter of regulating the machine so that they came out the right length and thickness for us to add the pointy ends that were required for a Banette – Banette's trade marked baguette. The emphasis now was on production throughout the day.

The average French person is looking for fresh baguettes early in the morning (from 6:30 A.M.), at lunchtime and on the way home, and the baker needed to be ready.

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I was also able to start making some sourdough loaves. Sourdough bread wasn't a part of the standard course, but my teachers encouraged me to experiment. I'd brought some starter from home that had survived being dried. I spent much time trying to find larger and larger containers for the starter. Making enough for 30 kilos of flour meant a lot of starter.

I had a love/hate relationship with my particular oven. Despite my protestations, my teachers refused to believe there was anything wrong with it, until they baked a batch of bread in it for lunch and discovered that the top deck just wasn't browning... Ah yes, lunch... We were definitely spoilt: no matter what else was going on, we were served a three-course lunch each day.



All too soon, the end was in sight. We spent a few days doing some patisserie, another day doing a range of regional breads. The workers from the mill behind would come in each day to grab some bread for their lunch and unfor-

tunately made off with some of our breads before we had a chance to display them all. We were not pleased!

I also spent a very informative day with the woman responsible for merchandising the Bannette stores. I learnt how to display breads, how to promote different breads at different times of day and how to package them beautifully. We'd previously had classes on the financial side of setting up a bakery and how to present it. We visited the mill behind the school where vast quantities of flour were mixed and bagged before being sent all over France.

As we were not setting up our own boulangeries in France, we missed out on the big farewell the previous group had had with all the millers who own the company arriving to greet and congratulate them. But it was an emotional day, giving a little speech to our tutors and other students, followed—of course—by a good lunch. In the past five months, I'd completed 675 hours of professional training, training that was worth every hard, draining day. I loved living in France and made some firm friends—an experience never to be forgotten.



DANIELLE'S TIPS FOR LEARNING BREAD MAKING IN FRANCE

1. Things will take a lot longer than you think.
2. It is understandably difficult for small bakeries to welcome inexperienced people into their business, WWOOF is a fantastic way to see whether bread baking is for you.
3. Make sure you speak the language well before you go. You really cannot get away with the basics.
4. In France, you need to have a bank account to get a mobile phone contract. So check out other options—pay as you go was really expensive
5. Getting a bank account is a challenge. I was asked for documentation that just doesn't exist in the UK. Having said that, Societe Generale were wonderful in sorting things out.
6. Say yes to everything. I made firm friends by teaching my teacher's children English
7. If you are not good at communal living (and I am not) go and find what will suit you. I actually paid the same amount as for student accommodation.
8. Find out exactly what equipment you need. My safety shoes had laces, which are not allowed in France!
9. Bread is a good way to make friends. Share what you make and you will be remembered.
10. Don't let any of my tips put you off. Just do it!