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Counter culture: At Boudin, fresh bread from an old source

By Allen Pierleoni - Bee Staff Writer

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Certain food items and dishes are surrounded in auras of mystique, which helps maintain the demand for them in the marketplace. Examples include cave-aged Roquefort cheese, oysters, regional barbecue and, of course, San Francisco sourdough bread.

Consider sourdough: "Wild yeast" floating in the air falls into the baker's mixture of flour and water and fosters a cycle of fermentation and growth. Bacteria, lactic acid and alcohol are involved. Daily, the baker can feed more flour and water to the living starter dough (a.k.a. the "mother sponge") and allow it to grow, sort of like the alien creature in the movie "The Blob."

And there's this: Depending on locale, each baker's sourdough bread will have a unique flavor that is determined by meteorological elements such as humidity and temperature. Really, the sourdough breads made in San Francisco are distinct because of the area's weather.

That short discourse is a backdrop to the lunch we had recently at the newly opened and jampacked Boudin SF at Loehmann's Plaza. (As for pronunciation, it's "boo-deen.")

The Boudin mother ship (founded in 1849) is still on Fisherman's Wharf, though the company has branched into 22 outlets throughout California; a 23rd will open Tuesday in Chicago.

Only four of the 22 are designated "Boudin SF." I asked Boudin CEO Dave Wolfgram what that means.

"The cafes serve soups and salads and don't bake on site," he said. "At the Boudin SFs, we have breakfast, lunch and dinner -- hot entrees, hot sandwiches and pizza, for instance -- and we bake at those sites. We've brought the baking back to the neighborhoods."

Note in passing: As the company has expanded, it has added bakery tours and demonstrations, museums, catering and a mail-order business.

Diners standing in line at the Loehmann's Plaza store can pass the time by watching the bakers prepare raw sourdough rounds for the oven. The finished breads are gorgeous and are displayed behind the order counter.

The lunch menu includes five salads (\$3.29-\$7.29), 12 sandwiches (\$6.29-\$9.99), five pizzas with crispy sourdough crust (\$7.99), six entrees including beef stew and the unusual Dungeness crab mac 'n' cheese (\$8.29-\$9.99), soups, chili and, of course, clam chowder (\$5.59-\$6.59).

We ordered a chicken club (with bacon, Swiss, avocado, lettuce, tomato and mayo) and a crabcake sandwich (Dungeness crabcakes dressed the same way, without the bacon and cheese) and a bowl of chowder -- in a ceramic bowl, not the very popular sourdough bread bowl.

The sandwich ingredients were fine, but what made the sandwiches special was the tangy, delicious, toasted sourdough bread. The flavor and texture were nonstop. "This is the kind of bread I'd like to have a hamburger on, instead of a bun," remarked my lunch pal.

The sandwiches were served with small spinach salads spiked with decent dressing.

We had glasses of iced tea, but the "tropical" flavor was little more than colored water.

As for the chowder, we found it hot, creamy and satisfying. We also found it ironic that a dish with its roots in New England should have evolved into an icon so closely identified with San Francisco. If Boudin SF was striving for authenticity, cioppino would be a more appropriate menu entry. Cans of the clam chowder (\$5) are on the display tables in front of the order counter, along with jars of tapenade and jams.

We did notice the absence of what once was a Boudin signature item -- toasty sourdough squares smeared with tomato sauce and melted mozzarella cheese, a.k.a. "wharf-style pizza." Turns out it's been replaced with the sourdough-crust round pizzas; the sole holdout is the Boudin bakery on Taylor Street in San Francisco.

There was one more question for Wolfgram: Where's the original Boudin starter dough stashed?

"The starter has been fed continuously since 1849 at our (bakery) at 10th Avenue and Fisherman's Wharf," he said. "All of our (raw) dough is descended from that original starter. On a regular basis, we deliver (some of) the mother dough to all our bakers. It's what makes our bread unique."

Boudin SF

WHERE: Loehmann's Plaza, 2573 Fair Oaks Blvd.

HOURS: Open daily; breakfast is 7-11 a.m.; lunch- dinner is 11 a.m.- 9 p.m.; Sundays till 8 p.m.

FOOD: 3 stars

AMBIENCE: 2 1/2 stars

HOW MUCH: \$-\$\$

INFORMATION: (916) 973-1849. www.boudinbakery.com.

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