

Norwich, Vt., lures bakers by the dozens

By Clare Innes
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

NORWICH, Vt. — In a bright, airy classroom here, halfway between the Green Mountains of Vermont and the Whites of New Hampshire, the sweet yeasty scent of rising dough mingles with the aroma of freshly baked bread.

The aroma inspires equal measures of mad desire and sublime contentment, and today 12 students have gathered at the Baking Education Center at King Arthur Flour headquarters for a four-hour class on how to make this smell happen in our homes.

It doesn't matter to instructor Bonny Hooper whether any of us are avowed cooks or whether our feeble attempts at baking bread more often result in smoldering little blocks of cinder. Her goal is for us to leave the classroom laden with two gorgeous holiday loaves and a short stack of biscuits of our own making — none guaranteed to survive the ride home.

Founded in 1790, King Arthur is the oldest flour company in the country. The flour is unbleached, which leaves intact its distinctive flavor, and is milled to some of the tightest specifications in the market.

Julia Child, Graham Kerr, and innumerable other master chefs have sung its praises. King Arthur's location in the Upper Connecticut River Valley near Quechee Gorge, the Montshire Museum of Science, and the artsy towns of Woodstock and Hanover, N.H., puts it smack-dab in the middle of driving-around-and-wishing-you-lived-here country.

King Arthur offers classes throughout the year, covering such delectable topics as holiday breads, baking with chocolate, the fine art of pizza, and how to build an earth oven. Cooking classes for children are offered. (A complete list is on the website, www.kingarthurfour.com, under "Baking Education.") These classes could be excellent gifts for the cooks, or wannabes, on your gift list.

Five long rows of butcher-block counters fill the classroom where we are tying on our aprons, eyeing the recipes, and finding out where each other is from. Some students drove more than three hours to get here. Others have been here many times since the school started five years ago, taking classes and loading up on goodies from the store next door, a destination in its own right.

Allison Hanley, 11, of Hanover, is here with her mother, Maureen. Allison loves to bake banana bread, and beams when her mother says, "When she has a bad day at school, we say 'There are some brown bananas, Allison!' and she makes banana bread and she feels better."

Hooper has been with King Arthur for

Gingered pumpkin bread

3½ cups unbleached flour
½ teaspoon ground ginger
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
¼ cup sugar
¼ cup diced crystallized ginger
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon active dry yeast
1½ cups (13½ ounces) pumpkin puree, fresh or canned
1 egg, lightly beaten
2 tablespoons (1 ounce) butter, melted

1. In a large bowl, combine the flour, ginger, cinnamon, sugar, ginger, salt, and yeast. Mix until well blended.

2. In another bowl, combine the pumpkin, egg, and butter. Add the pumpkin mixture to the flour mixture, stirring with a wooden spoon until the dough begins to come away from the sides of the bowl.

3. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured counter and knead it for a few minutes. Let it rest for 15 minutes.

4. Continue kneading until the dough is smooth. Add flour sparingly, only if the

dough is too sticky to work with.

5. Lightly oil a large bowl. Transfer the dough to the bowl, and turn it over so it is coated all over with oil. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap, and set it aside to rise for 1-1½ hours, or until it doubles in bulk.

6. Turn the dough out onto the counter and punch it down. Divide into six pieces. Roll each piece into a rope about 12 inches long.

7. Lightly grease a baking sheet. On one side of the sheet, braid three strands together. Pinch the ends and tuck them under. Make a second loaf on the baking sheet with the remaining three strands. Cover with a cloth and set aside to rise for 1 hour. The loaves should look puffy, though not necessarily doubled in bulk.

8. Set the oven to 375 degrees.

9. Bake the breads for 20-25 minutes, or until they are lightly browned and firm to the touch.

Makes 2 loaves.

Adapted from King Arthur Flour.

10 years. Besides teaching classes, she tests batches of flour, manages the kitchen in the retail store, and fields questions on the Baker's Hotline, where cooks of all stripes call with their quandaries: Do I really need cake flour to make a cake? Does yeast have a brain? I let my dough rise too long and it collapsed: What do I do?

This is exactly the kind of experience that makes her the perfect instructor for this group, which includes a chemistry teacher, a caterer, a handful of absolute neophytes, and a few seasoned bakers whose holiday output could tilt the GNP if they didn't give it all away.

On the agenda today are a gingered pumpkin bread, cranberry pecan bread, and cracked pepper biscuits. Before she calls us up to her workstation to walk us through the first few steps, Hooper assures us that any time we need help, she and her assistant will be there to guide us.

"If you have any yeast anxieties," she says encouragingly, "they'll be gone by the end of today." Judging from the sighs of relief, that's exactly what many of us needed to hear.

First the pumpkin bread: We learn the art of fluffing the flour before measuring, how to knead the dough to keep the yeast happy, and how to tell with the poke of a finger when the dough has had enough of our

ministrations. We set it aside to rise and turn our attention to the cranberry loaf.

We use organic Vermont cranberries the size of grapes, acquired from the farm stand next door, and get detailed lessons on using the scale from fellow student Bette Bridges, a chemistry teacher from Randolph, Mass. She learned to cook from her mother, who measures in dashes and jiggers rather than bothering with cups and teaspoons.

"My mother never measures," Bridges says as she fluffs the flour.

"Mine doesn't either," says Hooper, laughing.

"I'd watch and she'd throw something in a bowl," Bridges continues. "I'd have to take it and measure it to see how much she put in."

We make our way through the cranberry bread recipe, and then into the giant oven it goes, followed shortly after by the cracked peppercorn biscuits.

We return our attention to the pumpkin dough, which has risen to an orange dome and now glows as golden as a harvest moon. The next step is a daunting six-strand braiding session. We divide the dough into six equal hunks, roll them into ropes, line them up, and mash them together at one end.

Bonny leads us through the braiding technique with her dough. We turn to our own strands and begin, muttering the steps



CLARE INNES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Allison Hanley, 11, of Hanover, N.H., at the King Arthur Flour Baking Education Center in Norwich, Vt.

as though an incantation, and watch as they, too, disappear into the giant oven.

While our bread slowly bakes, we are free to roam through the Baker's Store, filling our shopping baskets with the implements and ingredients of our cooking dreams. The store is the hub of the baking universe, as far as the bakers among us and the throngs from afar who also roam the aisles are concerned.

Besides a huge variety of flour and innumerable baking mixes, there are at least eight varieties of sugar, measuring devices from shot-glass to bucket size, mixing bowls so big you could comfortably quadruple any recipe imaginable, kid-sized implements, a library's worth of cookbooks, including the company's own indispensable tomes, "The King Arthur Flour Baker's Companion" and "The King Arthur Flour Cookie Companion," and, best of all, a kitchen that produces breads, pastries, and treats galore to munch on while you're strolling the aisles.

Laden with bags and boxes, we return to the classroom to find our breads baked to perfection: a sweet, golden braid; a deep-brown rectangle punctuated with cranberries; and light, flaky biscuits just waiting for a dab of butter and a long ride home.

Contact Clare Innes, a freelance writer in Vermont, at indigoclare@yahoo.com.

If you go . . .

How to get there

Norwich, Vt., is about 130 miles north of Boston, about a two-hour drive. Follow Interstate 93 into New Hampshire, and pick up Interstate 89 north at Concord. Cross the Connecticut River into Vermont and get on Interstate 91 north to exit 13. Take a left off the exit ramp, go under the highway, and at the light, turn left onto Route 5 south. In less than half a mile, King Arthur Flour is on the left, in a gray building with red trim.

Where to stay

The Quechee Inn at Marshland Farm

Main Street, Quechee, Vt.
800-235-3133

www.quecheeinn.com

A sprawling, luxurious farmhouse with a restaurant, tavern, and miles of trails for hiking, cycling, and cross-country skiing. Rooms \$90-\$245.

The Norwich Inn

325 Main St., Norwich
802-649-1143

www.norwichinn.com

A cheery inn in the middle of postcard-perfect Norwich. Rooms \$65-\$149.

Where to eat

Skunk Hollow Tavern

Hartland Four Corners, off Route 12
(exit 9 off Interstate 91)

Hartland, Vt.

802-436-2139

A pub downstairs and elegant dining upstairs, popular with locals, particularly on open-mic night on Wednesdays. Entrees \$8-\$24.

Jasper Murdock's Alehouse

At the Norwich Inn (see above)

Entrees \$5-\$11.

Alléchante

Main and Elm streets, Norwich
802-649-2846

Scrumptious baked goods, a perfect cup of coffee, and inventive and ever-changing sandwiches (\$7-\$8) keep folks coming back for more. Tuesday-Friday 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m., till 3 on Saturday.

The Norwich Inn

(See above)

On-site restaurant serves its own brews and elegant fare. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Entrees \$16-\$25.

What to do

King Arthur Flour Company

135 Route 5 South, Norwich
800-827-6836

www.kingarthurfour.com

Classes offered throughout the year. This month, for example, a children's baking class noon-3 on Tuesday, is \$40, as is a pie-baking class 6-9 p.m. Thursday. Learn to make whole wheat bread on Jan. 2, 6-9 p.m., also \$40.