

Using your loaf



This award-winning chef-turned-baker reveals the secrets to his baking success – which all began with the sandwiches his dad made him for school.

By Sue Fea

FOR Auckland celebrity chef-turned baker Sean Armstrong, the humble Loaf is now supplying more than enough daily bread for his family, but the rise to success has not always been smooth. Loaf Handcrafted Breads rose out of small beginnings in a 100-square-metre Otahuhu garage in 2004. In just six years the company is now supplying between 60,000 and 75,000 buns and loaves per week from its Panmure bakery. In May it will expand into larger Penrose premises.

Thirty-six-year-old Armstrong says when he first started out on a whim that a bakery would be a great idea, they were using 120 kilos of flour per week. These days Loaf churns through 11 tonnes of flour – 10 to 11 pallets – a week, making gourmet breads with modern appeal. Being a baker was not something he initially set out to do, but when Armstrong sets his mind to succeed at

something he refuses to fail. He jokes that his dad's beloved school lunch sandwiches, nicknamed 'The Fridge' because of their contents – last night's dinner leftovers – with cheese, beetroot, tomato sauce and hundreds and thousands thrown in, first prompted him to "have a go" himself. The young chef started his apprenticeship at 16 at Auckland's Central Hotel, then headed overseas in 1996 to London where he cooked for three years, gaining some valuable experience at several Michelin star restaurants. This is where he learnt how

flavours and textures work.

Back home after a stint at O'Connell St Bistro in 2000, he went into business with the owner, Chris Upton and together they started Auckland's Prime, a bistro restaurant, espresso bar and catering business. "We tendered for the site so we could bake our own bread – we did 13 to 15 different breads, Turkish, ciabatta, paninis, hot cross buns, sourdough, croissants, Danish, everything...I thought, I'm not buying in bread when we can make it ourselves. Then one night I said to my wife, I reckon we should start a bakery and she said, 'you're mad'."



Although Armstrong values his accountant wife Kate's advice these days, he chose not to listen that day. He took three weeks off from Prime and set up the bakery equipment in the Otahuhu garage then went back to work at Prime. They were hectic days, the phone could go at 3am, 4am, or 5am, and it was a 24-hour business. "I often said to Kate, I've had enough, but I refused to give up." By 2006 he had sold his share in Prime because Loaf had "taken off". These days Armstrong is full-time running Loaf, solely a wholesale bread supplier, with a team of about 15 bakers working for him. Last year Loaf, described by the judges as "a fresh young Auckland bakery," won the Bakery Category for Food Product Innovation at the New Zealand Food Awards for its Potato Nigella Rosemary Sourdough. The loaf was described as having a "great blend of herb and potato flavour with a sourdough texture". He is constantly turning out new innovations, but Armstrong says it's critical to listen to what your customers want. "Adapt what they're after to suit

your model and production criteria.... there are so many breads out there I'd rather make..." But if the customers don't want it or know how to use it then it's not a winner.

Another key is educating customers with recipes and knowledge – they need to taste the bread, understand its flavours, textures and characteristics. "We do a bit of market research and do tastings to try and educate our customer base."

Loaf churns out everything from balsamic-roasted garlic ciabatta loaves to rosemary and ryes, loaves using olives.... the possibilities are endless. The flavour combinations have probably been done before but the secret is in doing it well.

"Everyone's had walnut and fig loaf, but not many have had walnut and fig sourdough."

Armstrong believes business success is "quite logical really". Surround yourself with a top team of good productive staff, advisors and mentors. "If you listen, it's not hard." His wife Kate is an amazing help: "She's switched on and has an incredible eye for detail." Then there's

his business mentor Clive Quinn, also an accountant.

Loaf has a wide client base, supplying everyone from small cafes and caterers to mobile lunch bars and Foodstuffs outlets around the North Island. Chocolate brownies, ginger crunch, Louise slice and "lots of doughnuts" head out the door daily, among the bread varieties. "People are quite nostalgic – they want what it used to be like." Customers are "fed up" with pre-mix, ready-to-eat style foods and want to buy something that they know has had a skill involved in its production, he says. "Handcrafting is massively important to us."

Success has not come easy. There's been a lot of hard work along the way. Armstrong went out looking for "any avenue to make an impression", which he has. He advises any young baker starting out to listen to what their customers want. "Don't give up, never give up, you'll feel beaten and broken, but get up and keep going. Go back to the kitchen, I have failed there more than I've succeeded, that's just how it goes."

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