

# Tabor Bread: The Challenges of In-House Milling & Whole Grain Wood-Fired Baking

By EZRA SANDZER-BELL

*Ezra Sandzer-Bell is a Portland writer who works in the business department of Tabor Bread. In this article, he delves into the milling and baking part of the bakery.*

**T**abor Bread is a small, independent bakery located in southeast Portland, Oregon. We are positioned in a brick farmhouse-style building about half a mile from the base of Mount Tabor. Our front of house serves delicious breakfast, brunch, and lunch options, plus a variety of select wines and espresso drinks. However, what draws most people to Tabor Bread is our house-milled flour and wood-fired bread.

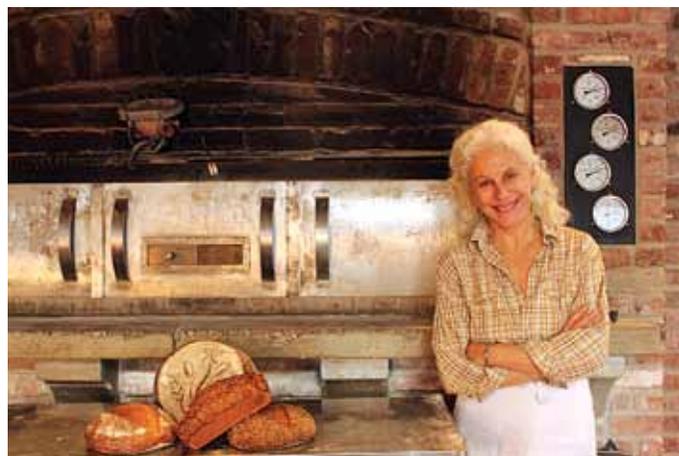
Owner Tissa Stein discovered this style of baking about 20 years ago while seeking out nutritious food for her family. Her primary inspiration was Alan Scott, the wood-fired oven designer and baker who promoted the use of house-milled grain. After years of enjoying this style of bread, Tissa moved to Portland and eventually founded Tabor Bread as a tribute to the craft.

Our bakery sources its grain from local, small-scale farmers, and mills the grain in-house. This helps us to know exactly

how fresh our flour is and guarantees that the enzymes and oils in the grain are intact, making for a more flavorful bread.

Our mill was built by an Austrian company, Osttiroler. Their horizontal stone mills are built from a centuries-old design, with a beautiful pine frame that looks and feels like a fine piece of furniture. The mill not only performs beautifully, but also enhances the space that it occupies, serving as a centerpiece for the bakery.

A large brick oven is a prominent part of the dining area. The fires are built from locally sourced, chemical-free compressed wood. Tissa had the following to say about working with the oven: “Managing the temperatures and staying power of a retained heat, wood-fired oven is a daily challenge. But when our long-fermented doughs, made from fresh-milled flour, meet up with the right oven conditions, there is absolutely nothing out there that compares for quality and flavor of crumb and crust.”



Tissa Stein, owner of Tabor Bread, by the wood-fired oven.

To better understand the techniques and challenges of creating a desem loaf, I spoke to the lead baker, Brad Holderfield. He explained that our bread is heavily influenced by a Belgian style called the “desem” loaf, which refers to the use of 100% whole grain and straight flours combined with water and a wild sourdough starter. Our flour is typically used within 24 hours of processing. We feed the levain frequently and let the shaped loaves retard overnight to produce a mild, lactic profile. The purpose of this slow fermentation process is to draw out qualities in the bread that reflect the nature of the grain itself; we aim for density in the bread’s flavor, aroma, and nutritional content.

There are many benefits to using house-milled flour, but it comes with a unique set of challenges. Aged flour performs in more predictable ways and can be much easier to work with, whereas fresh flour often creates a grey area where our



ALL PHOTOS: LEE ELLEN REED



FROM LEFT: Red Wheat Boules, stencil designs by Ulises Alvarez. Ulises Alvarez, Assistant Lead Baker, displaying his bread.



hydrations and temperature baselines are subject to change depending on environmental conditions.

We have to choose the right temper for our grains, abide by specific milling methods, and keep a careful eye on the grain lot. The level of awareness and attention to detail required for these operations can be time consuming, especially in a city like Portland, where the weather is constantly fluctuating.

The time investment is very rewarding. A high-quality 100% extraction flour clumps easily in your hand and has a fine balance of large bran shards and finely powdered germ and endosperm. At this stage, oxidation begins to work its way slowly through the flour and will not produce a “stable” flour for quite some time.

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During this phase, we are faced with the risk of excessive starch damage, a virtually invisible process which potentially prevents us from achieving loaves of sufficient volume and pleasant texture later down the line. To circumvent this, we attempt to mill gently, allowing the berries to roll around the stones at the proper rate as the furrows and lands do their job. We can also adapt our mixing

and fermentation process to lessen the effects of excessive enzymatic activity resulting from this starch damage.

When we mill the flour correctly, the results are fantastic: a puffy, full-colored boule with intense Maillard aromas. The crumb is irregular and speckled with bran, with a taste indicative of the locally sourced, heirloom variety, organic or transitional organic grain that we started with.

The use of fresh flour is not limited to Tabor’s breads. Lead pastry chef, Lillie Taggart, had this to add about the use of whole grains in the scones, cookies, and biscotti at Tabor Bread: “We’ve started milling soft white wheat berries into whole grain pastry flour. This means that all of our pastries are now 100% whole grain. I like to blend the whole wheat pastry flour with other flours that we mill, like kamut and rye.”

She feels that the use of house-milled flour in pastries leads to greater density and a rich flavor profile.

Assistant lead baker, Ulises Alvarez, creates stencils at home and brings them to the bakery, where he has the freedom to experiment with different dusting techniques. Just before putting the bread in the oven to bake, the bakers score the dough and apply a surface design. His bread art features a beautiful contrast between light dusting flour and dark, caramelized dough.

I feel honored to work with my peers and to be a part of this strong, supportive community. ✨



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: White Wheat Batard. Red Wheat Boules, stencil designs by Ulises Alvarez. Lillie Taggart, Lead Pastry Chef, making Peanut Butter Cayenne Cookies. Brad Holderfield, Lead Baker (right), with Ulises Alvarez, by Tabor Bread’s mill.

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