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FT Masterclass: Boulangerie with Thomas Teffri-Chambelland

By Anna Brooke

With two artisanal bakeries – and a mill – to his name, who better to teach the tricky art of making gluten-free bread rise than the Paris baker?



Thomas Teffri-Chambelland arranging the displays in the Paris boulangerie

“Keep pouring,” says Thomas Teffri-Chambelland, as I tip water on to the 25kg of flour he has just heaped in a giant dough mixer. It’s 7am and we’re making loaves at Chambelland Boulangerie – his new Parisian bakery – ready for opening at 9am.

I feel anxious as the water turns the fine, paper-white flour into a papier-mâché mush. Surely the dough should be stiffer than this? “Don’t worry,” he says. “The flour will absorb the fluid.”

He’s right, of course. After a few turns of the mixer an island of new dough is peaking through the liquid. Then Teffri-Chambelland brings over a bucket of frothy beige leaven – a mix of fermented flour, water and a few natural yeast shavings. “This makes the dough rise, of course, but it’s also what gives the bread its aroma,” he says, and as he pours it into the bowl a waft of fragrant air hits my nose – a delicious, bittersweet mix of citrus and beer hops.

In 2001, Teffri-Chambelland left a career as a biochemistry teacher to open an organic bakery in Sisteron, a town in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence department. He has since sold that one but, last year, he opened La Fabrique à Pain in Aix-en-Provence. In 2006, he also founded the École Internationale de Boulangerie (EIDB), which awards France’s only state-accredited baking diploma specialising in organic raw materials and natural leaven.



Thomas Teffri-Chambelland and Anna Brooke inspect the dough

Some 30 to 40 students a year from around the world now head to Noyers-sur-Jabron in Provence, to enrol on the courses that Teffri-Chambelland runs from what he refers to as a “wooden cabin in the mountains”. Today, I am learning a tiny part of what they will study: the art of making leaven bread.

This, however, is no ordinary, wheat-based bread. At Teffri-Chambelland’s small bakery-pâtisserie-café in the 11th *arrondissement*, nestled between bars and antique shops, we’re creating gluten-free leaven bread made from his own blend of rice and buckwheat flour.

‘You grab it like

Gluten-free produce exists in Paris, of course, but this is

this,' says Teffri-Chambelland, his arms positioned like a ballerina's – extended, with the hands cupped

surely the only GF bakery that can lay claim to its own Provençal rice-flour mill – its supplies come from Le Moulin Chambelland, which Teffri-Chambelland opened in April. The Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse is already buying Chambelland's rice bread for his restaurant at the Plaza Athénée.

The mixer slows to a halt to reveal a pert ball of dough sitting in the bottom of the bowl like a gigantic pearl. This means it's time to put the leavened dough into the bakery's signature flat rectangular moulds.

Teffri-Chambelland bends over the bowl to scoop up the mixture, his arms positioned like a ballerina's – extended, with the hands cupped, almost touching. "You grab it like this," he says, as he plunges his hands into the dough, before transporting the mixture carefully into the mould. I try to copy his movements, enjoying the feeling of the warm, sticky dough.

As we fill the trays – bend, splatch, bend, splatch – I ask Teffri-Chambelland where the idea for a gluten-free bakery came from. As a former biochemistry teacher, he explains, he had always enjoyed research and, after opening the EIDB, he decided to investigate new bread-making techniques. A gluten-free project appealed because gluten is what gives dough its elasticity; take it out of the equation and you have to find something else to hold the bread together.

Buckwheat and rice were obvious replacements because both are naturally gluten free and easily sourced from the Camargue in France and northern Italy. His task then became to identify the varieties of rice that would give him the right texture and elasticity.

"I worked alongside the Centre Français du Riz," he says. "There are tens of thousands of rice varieties and not all of them are suited to bread making – without the centre's help it would have taken a lifetime." He is reluctant to share the results – "that's a trade secret" – revealing only that "they're from the Japonica family".

Once the dough is distributed, Teffri-Chambelland hands me a spatula and shows me how to spread it across the tin. You have to do it in fast, short, even strokes, gently pushing the mixture into the corners. When the dough is evenly distributed, it is scored with diagonal criss-cross patterns – trickier than it sounds as the dough keeps sticking to the sides of my spatula, making little peaks and troughs.



Gluten-free loaves



Trays of hot bread

As the bread is left to rise, we head to the oven area, where half-a-dozen previously prepared trays are waiting to be cooked. These breads have to be scored again, multiplying the criss-crosses made earlier, "to help get a good crunchy crust". Then we load the trays into the oven, where they'll cook for 40 minutes, and head upstairs for breakfast in the café-bakery – a bright space with white walls, exposed copper pipes and vintage Formica furniture.

The displays brim with strawberry cakes, chocolate tarts, muffins made with chestnuts and peaches, lemon meringue tarts, bronkies – chocolate chip cookies-cum-brownies – and oblong, sugar-coated breads called Chambellines, all entirely gluten-free and proof that Teffri-Chambelland is aiming for custom beyond a GF-only clientele. The only things I can't see, I realise, are traditional croissants or pains au chocolat. "Rice flour doesn't work well with those," explains Teffri-Chambelland.

While our batch of dough rises, we take coffee, a couple of rice-bread tartines and some home-made strawberry jam outside on to the terrace. The bread is pillow-soft in the middle and crunchy outside.

Breakfast over, Teffri-Chambelland heads back into the fray – the dough I helped him make needs to reach customers well before lunchtime. I think back to earlier, when he had jokingly called over to me: "Watch what you're doing with that one – it might be for the Plaza Athénée."

I like that idea.

Chambelland Boulangerie, 14 rue Ternaux, 11th Paris, +33 1 4355 0730; chambelland.com

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