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Photograph by Michael Kelley

Feature

THE SONS ALSO RISE

For nearly a century the Garacochea family made L.A.'s greatest bread. They're out to do it again, one sourdough round at a time By Ann Herold

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The Process: Part One

A great round of sourdough bread is miraculous. Its production is labor intensive and almost unchanged from hundreds of years ago. The process takes days, if you count the time to nurture the starter. During the final ten hours, not a single error can occur. The bacteria in the starter (or sponge) must toil like a world-class athlete in converting the sugars in the flour into a puffy dough. If it's not in tip-top condition, it will collapse. If it's in any way hindered from running its race, it will never recover.

The foot traffic is brisk on Venice's Rose Avenue. It's nothing compared with the procession of trucks. One after another rumbles by loaded with dirt, and the pedestrians feel the shaking in the soles of their feet. A gaping pit marks where, for almost 90 years, the Garacochea family sent millions of loaves out the doors of its Pioneer Bakery, bread so flavorful that by the 1970s, the company had generated a sourdough revolution.

John Garacochea, great-grandson of the Basque immigrant who founded the bakery, is watching the construction from a café table across the street. His five-foot-nine frame easily fits the bistro-style chair, but he's having a hard time making himself heard over the din. A developer is constructing a complex with five

second-story town homes and six ground-floor retail units and is naming it the Pioneer Building. John's stoked: He's hoping to take over a 2,000-square-foot space and re-create the family operation. He saved the bricks from the original structure, 7,000 in all, and imagines using them to decorate the facade or to build an oven. The Pioneer brand was sold in 2003 to SoCal Bakeries in Santa Ana, and John worked briefly at that commercial enterprise. He doesn't complain, but it must have been difficult to watch the bread change. The SoCal operation is fully automated and lacks the handwork that made Pioneer extraordinary.

John dreams on: He wants his baking visible to the public and to pipe the smells out to the street. Talk to anyone from the neighborhood and they'll tell you how much they've missed the aroma. He's thinking about a selection of pastries, such as Pioneer once offered at its boulangerie. Croissants, certainly, and brioches. Perhaps scones and Danish. "You know those four-wheeled bikes?" he says. "I want to put carts behind those and offer local bread delivery." He's interrupted by a



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panhandler with a Dalí mustache and eyebrows drawn on his face, and he courteously parries the man's request for change.

Those carts would be symbolic; his great-grandfather first sold bread from a horse-drawn wagon. All the Garacochea men worked at Pioneer, but it wasn't necessarily a calling. One cousin finished Kansas State University's baking program, then became a cop. Another cousin ran the Venice bakery and left to buy a deli. But John has the waters of Le Petit Nive, the river of his ancestral village, running through his veins. He's still pursuing the perfect Basque sourdough. A little more than a year ago he started his own wholesale bakery, Etxea, in Hawthorne. It's sending him out the door of his Mandeville Canyon house at 3:30 each morning, seven days a week. Some nights he falls asleep before his four-year-old daughter, Gracie. "I have a favorite saying from Margaret Thatcher, which I keep telling myself," he says. "Don't go wobbly on me now."

At the building site a cloud of dust hovers like a ghost. The sun pierces the haze, and John frowns at the blast of heat. Then he looks over at the construction and grins. One hundred years of history, to be continued.

The Process: Part Two

The original Pioneer bakery was ideally located. Ocean air keeps conditions moist; a dough that's drying out forms a necrotic skin. The presence of offshore winds, such as Santa Anas, means a baker faces the added challenge of holding temperatures in check. He trusts the sponge has been stored at 75 degrees, but he touches the mixing bowl to discern if it is the requisite 72 degrees, dips a hand in the water to ensure its temperature matches. Heat outside likely means warm air inside, and air-conditioning isn't an option; blowing air sucks the moisture out of the dough. To compensate, the baker will put enough ice in the water to drop it to 70 degrees; that way the dough won't heat past 75 during the seven- to eight-minute mix. At Pioneer the baker checked a DWP report on what was moving through the city pipes. The water from Northern California was cool; the alternate supply from the Colorado River a little warmer. Always, the baker has temperatures on the brain.

Jean Baptiste Garacochea was 16 when he left Les Aldudes in the French Pyrenees for America. It was 1899. Family lore has it that he brought with him a sourdough starter, or sponge, from his father's bakery. The Basques were particularly enamored of sourdough bread, which originated in ancient Egypt, and the starter that Jean Baptiste likely carried had been nurtured by his family since the 1700s.

Once on land Jean Baptiste made a beeline for the Basque community in Tehachapi. He moved to Santa Monica a few years later, where he founded National French Bakery in 1908. He was 25. Most of his customers wanted traditional French white bread, but the farmers preferred the three- and five-pound sourdough rounds, which they kept moist with a towel and ate throughout the week. Jean Baptiste delivered the sourdough to farms as far north as Malibu and south as San Pedro, at the same time peddling a red wine he made from Bakersfield grapes. When Santa Monica went dry in 1917, he stormed off to Venice, which stayed wet.

On Rose Avenue Jean Baptiste erected a distinctive brick building with a second story of wood. His bakery was on the ground floor, and the family lived above it. To keep his children close, he added a couple of small houses and two duplexes, one with retail space. The Kennedyesque compound had a large garden, where Jean Baptiste grew vegetables for his soups, and a barn, which sheltered a 3,000-gallon wine vat and two trucks that replaced the horse.

He was short and husky—typically Basque. A portrait of him shows a handsomely proportioned face with a deeply cleft chin; if his nose were sharper, he would resemble a Barrymore. As a child, he played the pipe organ in his village church. As an adult at Basque gatherings in Chino and La Puente, he serenaded the revelers with his accordion. "He had a magnetism," a granddaughter recalls. "You know how some people walk into a room and with no effort fill it up? Tatxi," she says, using the Basque diminutive (*ta-CHI*) for "grandfather," "was like that." He had two sons, Jean Baptiste, nicknamed Bap, and Edmund, who were young in 1940 when their father collapsed while loading a truck. He died two weeks later at 57. "I can remember looking back at the cars in the funeral procession," the granddaughter says, "and they stretched as far as the eye could see." The year before the company's name had been changed to Pioneer. No one is sure why except that it sounded more American.

Jack Garacochea was four when his grandfather died, but he remembers how Tatxi would cook him soup for lunch, give him sips of wine, and the two would take a nap. In 1969, Jack's father, Bap, also died young and unexpectedly, at 63. Jack officially took over the bakery upon his death, but it had been his life since he graduated from high school. At the time Pioneer's primary competitors—Weber's, Van de Kamp's, Frisco, and Foix, among others—were clustered along "bread alley," a section of San Fernando Road reaching from Glassell Park to Glendale. Two others, Los Angeles Baking Company and Taix, were in Chinatown. Like them, Pioneer concentrated on French bread; sourdough wasn't as popular because no

one had come up with a machine that could preslice the thick crust. These small bakeries—many of which had been in business for decades—“went nose to nose with each other,” Jack says, but there were plenty of local markets in which to sell their wares. Pioneer had its eye on Vons, an L.A. group founded by a Danish family. In 1952, Pioneer had persuaded the Santa Monica Vons to offer a novelty item, fresh French bread that was hot after the short trip from Venice. Vons relegated it to the pets section, but the bread always sold out.

After an Orange County company invented a machine that not only sliced sourdough but sealed it in cellophane, Jack altered Pioneer’s schedule so he could get sourdough to markets right out of the ovens as well. The response was intense. Sourdough appealed to the weight conscious (no added fats or sugars) and the health conscious (no preservatives). The Pioneer flavor was unique—tangy without being bitter. Customers loved that the bread was still warm. By the late 1960s, Pioneer sourdough was in every major L.A. grocery and a host of restaurants. The bakery was among the Westside’s largest employers (Bap was famous for hiring Venice and Santa Monica teenagers in need of jobs) and emerging as the premier sourdough supplier in Southern California. People were forever trying to buy the starter—it wasn’t for sale—and its feeding and care were well-guarded secrets.

On a rare vacation in 1973, Jack went to his Basque motherland; everyone before him had been too busy working to visit. He was transformed by its food and the leisurely manner in which people dined. When he returned, he convinced the family that a boulangerie would expose Southern Californians to this lifestyle while promoting the Garacocheas’ singular sourdough. Bread, cheese, and wine would be sold just inside the entry, and the menu would focus on soups and stews. He would put it on Santa Monica’s Main Street, which was then a dreary strip of warehouses, garages, and shuttered businesses. An old meatpacking warehouse was redone with charming timber accents and a dormer roof. A story in the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* told readers of an upcoming European-style restaurant.

Opening day, January 18, 1976, fell on Super Bowl Sunday. The staff—dressed in Basque finery of lace-trimmed blouses and white head scarves for the women and berets for the men—was in its final meeting when a worker announced that a line had formed along Main. When the doors opened at 11, the queue went around the block and snaked down Bicknell. As customers spooned up such fare as San Sebastian fish stew and Napoli meatball and vegetable soup, the restaurant ran out of bowls; the dishwashers couldn’t keep up.

The crowds continued over the years. Among the customers was ten-year-old Josiah Citrin, whose French grandfather picked him up Saturday mornings in a 1963 Chevy Nova for trips to the boulangerie. “That place was so far ahead of its time,” says Citrin, whose own French restaurant, *Mélisse*, two decades later raised the bar for fine dining in L.A. “It was real European food that wasn’t available anywhere. I mean, the typical dining then was Denny’s and Norms. They had a great patio, and my grandfather would get his coffee and croissant and hang out. That I got to experience that lifestyle was a big part in what happened to me. And the bread was always great.”

Sensing that it was ushering L.A. into the unfamiliar, the boulangerie offered a guide to wine pronunciation: *sha-blee* (chablis), *kah-ber-nay so-vee-nyonh* (cabernet sauvignon). Jack and his brother, Jay, took wine classes at UCLA and stocked unusual varietals that you could find in maybe one other place—the avant-garde Wally’s in Westwood. In the cold cases were more than 70 cheeses, many of which people had never heard of.

It was a good era to be an independent baker. In the 1970s, the local French Bread Association had 37 members.

By the 1990s, there were two.

The Process: Part Three

The sponge is the heart of the baker. Divided and refreshed periodically with flour, a sponge is ready for mixing when it’s puffed up to just shy of collapsing; torn open, it should emit a tangy aroma that jolts the sinuses. Both signal the sponge has the right energy. Past its prime, it won’t be able to perform. Too young, it will expend its strength quickly. If the sponge were the equivalent of an athlete, you’d want a 35-year-old, not an 18-year-old, and you certainly wouldn’t want a 60-year-old.

John was eight when he started working with his father, Jack, at the bakery, where he swept up or bagged rolls. He remembers as a teenager games of hockey on the shipping room floor, using frozen rolls as pucks. During summer breaks from high school and college, John drove one of the delivery trucks. He wasn’t sure he wanted to stay in the business and entered law school. He was studying in London in 1987 when he got word that his father was thinking of selling out. Jack had assumed John didn’t want to run Pioneer. “I had expected to come back, but on my

time," says John. "Now it was my time." He called his dad and said wait and was home within two weeks.

The pull of the family business often felt, as John describes it, like *Star Trek's* tractor beam. "But how many people would love to say that they had a business that was multigenerational, where aunts and uncles and cousins worked there?" John says. "Part of it was heritage. Part of it was gratitude. That bread supported a lot of people." John discovered that he was an old soul. Trips to Les Aldudes felt like going home; he later bought the ancestral farmhouse. In its shadow flows the crystalline Le Petit Nive, and above it wind trails through the rolling mountains, where wild foals sleep in the ferns. The white stucco houses with red tile roofs are immaculate; they could be in Switzerland. The weekly farmers' market is a feast of artisanal cheeses, hams, and sausages, gourmet olives, and produce so fresh it practically quivers. John enjoys describing the day he sat in the town of St.-Étienne-de-Baigorry, tearing off bits of a baguette as he watched 30 men, each with his prized ewe, face off in what could only be a beauty contest for sheep. He had never been more content.

The family's next step was like jumping off the Pyrenees. The Garacochea motto was "The customer is always right," and the customers wanted more bread. Pioneer had the highest brand recognition of any L.A. bakery, Jack was told by Oroweat executives at a trade function in the early 1980s. The only way to meet the demand was to partly bake the bread, then freeze it for shipping. The final baking would take place at the stores that bought it. Supermarket chains loved the plan. Local sales were stratospheric; imagine what could happen in all 50 states. The family established a 90,000-square-foot parbake facility in Oxnard. The farms and orchards there had a system that distributed fresh produce around the country, and Pioneer could piggyback. Just as the parbake operation opened in 1990, a recession hit. Remarkably, demand for the bread outside California helped the company flourish. By 1995, it was in Walmart, and a third of Pioneer's business was in supermarkets east of the Mississippi. When Maple Leaf Foods, a huge Canadian conglomerate, came shopping for a parbake plant in 1996, the family was ready to cash in on what had become a \$24 million enterprise.

Because of his law degree, John handled the business side of the operations, which were especially demanding in light of union contracts that most bakeries had signed in the 1930s. The Teamsters agreement, for one, had restricted deliveries on Wednesdays and Sundays. Now the supermarket chains were squeezing out small grocery stores that were the lifeblood of independent bakers. The supermarkets in turn were charging high slotting fees for shelf space, costs that were exorbitant for bakeries paying union wages and benefits. One bakery after another closed. By the 1990s, the French Bread Association was down to Pioneer and Frisco.

Meanwhile the boulangerie was losing business to Santa Monica's new 3rd Street Promenade. In 1993, the family shut down the restaurant. Jack and John were able to shower more attention on the venerable bakery on Rose Avenue in Venice. It was showing its age, but there were no complaints about the bread emerging from its ovens. L.A. stores and restaurants favored it, even as a new artisan baker, Nancy Silverton of La Brea Bakery, became the city's darling. "I was playing golf," John says, "and one of the guys, on hearing I was from Pioneer, said, 'You've got great bread, but La Brea's got the best. I had it at the Grill on the Alley.'"

"I told him that was our bread. Then he said, 'What about the bread at Kate Mantilini?'"

"No, that's our bread."

"He said, 'What about Ocean Avenue Seafood? That's La Brea.'"

"No, that's strike three," I told him.

"I called my dad and said, 'I've got good news and bad news. We've got the best sourdough in L.A., but everybody thinks it's La Brea.'"

Jack admired Silverton and envied her lack of union commitments. "She was free as a bird to go in and out wherever she wanted," he says.

The revival of the Atkins Diet in the late 1990s, followed by the debut of the South Beach Diet, was devastating to all bakeries, triggering a sharp decline in bread sales. The Garacocheas wondered if they should hold on to their heirloom. The wage and benefits liabilities were daunting. Rising real estate costs meant workers could no longer live minutes away; they were commuting from places like Canyon Country and Ventura. Freeway jams were undermining delivery deadlines. When the family finally sold the bakery that their patriarch, Jean Baptiste Garacochea, had established almost a century before, it was painful but in some ways a relief. SoCal purchased the brand and other assets. The property went to a developer whose plans collapsed in the economic meltdown of 2007.

John patiently waited for the noncompetition period to end. He couldn't use the name, but maybe he could resurrect the bread.

The Process: Part Four

Once the sponge, water, and flour—hard wheat milled to 11.8 percent protein so that it holds its shape—are mixed, the dough is dumped into long troughs. Over the next two-and-a-half hours it relaxes and expands until the container is almost filled and the dough temperature reaches 78 (summer) or 80 (winter). Because sourdough can't withstand mechanical compression, long pieces are sliced by hand and fed into a divider, which gently separates the dough into pound-and-a-half lumps that are eased onto a softly spinning rounder. In the final shaping, metal molders almost as sensitive as human fingers tug and roll the dough until it bears a silky gluten sheen. Proofing boxes shelter the pale mounds for another six to eight hours as they continue fermenting ever so slowly. Expert hands make cuts for gases to escape; after baking, the loaf should look as if it has formed wide eyes.

When John's cousins Bobby Garacochea and Irene Howard first contemplated buying Bay Cities Italian Deli in 1993, they parked in a lot across the street and counted the people walking in and out. At the time Bobby was involved in running Pioneer's Venice, Oxnard, and boulangerie bakeries, and Irene was working in the Rose Avenue office. Bay Cities was up for sale after recovering from a years-long slump. The owner wanted \$700,000—in cash. He had offers from an ad in *The Wall Street Journal* but was thrilled at Bobby and Irene's interest. The deli had an unbroken line of Italian owners; the two were Italian on their mother's side. It took 12 minutes to seal the deal. The siblings sold a Rancho Mirage house they shared and three cars from Bobby's vintage collection. A family friend fronted them \$300,000. Their mother came up with \$150,000. The pair approached a bank for the rest. The loan officer was French Algerian, and he and Bobby bonded over bread.

Bobby and Irene took possession on May 1 the following year. They washed and scrubbed. Bobby installed 150 new lights. "We couldn't even take inventory, we were so busy," he says. Orders were sent in by fax, often in handwriting that was indecipherable. The Internet proved invaluable; within 15 minutes of launching their Web site, they had their first online customer. "We were still doing tests and hadn't even announced the online service," Bobby says. "God knows how they found us."

Nowadays the long line of drivers waiting to get into the Bay Cities parking lot is a fact of life in Santa Monica. Many are there to pick up sandwiches they ordered online. Those who haven't used the Web service face another wait at the counter, but they're happy to get their hands on such creations as the Godmother: Genoa salami, mortadella, *capicola*, ham, prosciutto, provolone, peppers, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, mustard, and mayonnaise, served on a special bread. Bobby tweaked the classic sourdough to come up with an Italian-style version that has developed its own cult following. The bread is shaped by hand; most bakeries use mechanical molders, but Bobby says they sap some of the dough's energy. He bakes throughout the day, not only for the deli but to produce the one-pound loaves and sliced sandwich rounds he sells under the brand name Filone, which are warm when they're placed in a display by the cheese cases.

Bobby prices the one-pound loaf at \$1.79, though it costs \$2 to make. He and Irene trust that once folks are in the door for the bread, they'll browse the other products: the 120 olive oils, the rare balsamic vinegars, the obscure cheeses. The siblings want Bay Cities to be the ultimate Italian market and are loath to carry products that are in the chains. "We have a philosophy: Anything you can find at Vons, we won't buy," says Bobby. "Every time you go mainstream with the artisan products, it means they're no longer artisan. They're being manufactured." Irene canvasses shoppers: What countries have they been to and what have they liked? "Once they tell me, I immediately get on the phone to vendors and see if I can get it," she says. Between the baking schedule and the personal attention, the two haven't had more than a week off since acquiring the deli. Like so many in the Garacochea clan, they are not afraid of hard work. "This store isn't structured for us to get rich," Bobby says. "It's structured for us to have a job."

The Process: Part Five

If everyone has completed their job throughout the dark night, the bread emerging from the ovens crackles satisfyingly as the reddish-brown crust is sliced, the redness a sign that the bacteria has done its work zapping all the sugars. The cloud-soft, pleasingly tart center will practically melt on the tongue. "Knowing that you've hit your mark that particular day, that particular moment, is great, but you never stop evaluating and thinking about the next day," says Bobby Garacochea. "Sourdough never sleeps."

John Garacochea went wholesale. He found a bright industrial space, part of the Hawthorne airport conversion, and enlisted brother Charlie as VP of everything—computer systems, vendor orders and delivery, dough mixing. Salvador Perez, who had been the dough mixer at Pioneer for 32 years, rejoined the Garacocheas. John's dad Jack was working gratis five days a week, "throwing around dough when things don't go right," said John. Last February his new bakery—Etxea (pronounced eh-eh-eh-a), the Basque word for "home"—received its health permit and opened for business.

John focused on restaurants and won back many of the original Pioneer patrons: Lawry's, Kate Mantilini, Michael's, Stanley's, Bistro Garden, Tam O'Shanter, George Petrelli's Steak House, Paradise Cove, Versailles, Twenty Six Beach, Enterprise Fish Company, and the Galley—the last a relationship that started in 1934. Traffic was his biggest headache. Jack experienced it one morning when he went to Sorrento Italian Market in Culver City, which uses the bread in its deli; the trip from Hawthorne took an hour. John's father-in-law pitched in, driving daily at 6 a.m. from Newport Beach to pick up bread for three Orange County accounts. "What the hell was I thinking getting back into this business?" John asked on a recent Friday. "Today I had to destroy a lot of dough because it didn't come out right. Now I'm slogging through traffic in Beverly Hills to make deliveries."

For a Garacochea these are hardly words of despair—only acknowledgment of a challenge. When Lawry's talked to John about sending the bread to its out-of-state restaurants, it forced him to think about adding a parbake operation. He took the plunge in November, buying an adjoining unit for the expansion, and began shipping bread to Lawry's in Dallas and Las Vegas. He's been too swamped to look for a retail outlet; direct sales to the public might have to wait until 2012, when the Pioneer Building on Rose Avenue is finished and he hopes to reincarnate his great-grandfather's operation.

Other tests were more easily met. John was eating tapas at Bar Pintxo ("it's authentic," he declared), recounting meetings with Ben Ford of Ford's Filling Station and Walter Manzke at Le Saint Amour (the Culver City bistro signed up three weeks later). He got a call that Michael's needed more rolls. There were three dozen in the freezer of his Brentwood home for such an occasion. His wife, Happy, drove their 13-year-old, Jack, to the Santa Monica restaurant to drop off the bread. His son was ecstatic, John said. He likes everything about the family business, especially hobnobbing with the restaurateurs. "I was putting him to bed when he was about eight, and I asked him what he wanted to be," John said. "He looked at me like I'd said the stupidest thing ever and told me, 'I want to be a baker like you, Dad.'"

Ann erold is the managing editor for Los Angeles magazine. er article on fi e classic L.A. homes appeared in the cto er issue.

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