

What makes new Orleans Cuisine so Special?

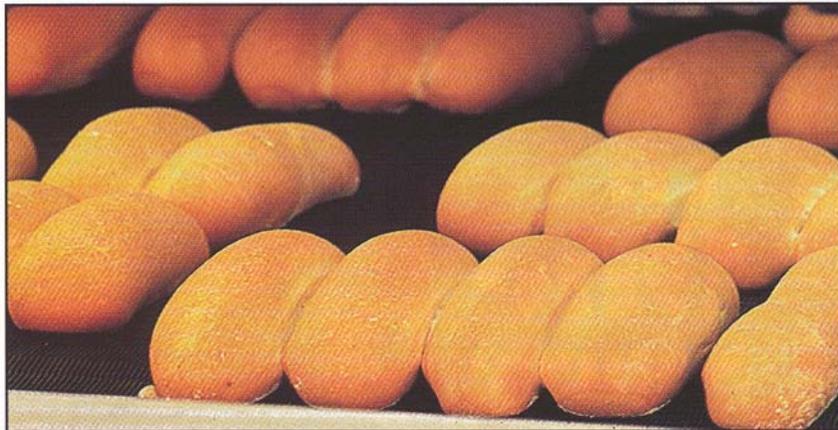
IT'S THE BREAD

Loaves of crispy, thin-crust French bread baked

by G.H. Leidenheimer Baking Co., New Orleans, are a mainstay at the

community's many restaurants and sandwich shops. Just as the city's signature

po-boy sandwich wouldn't exist without its characteristic long roll,



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Automated baking helps New Orleans' premier French bread producer boost output and enhance tradition.

BY LAURIE GORTON

By baking French bread on the plant's new automatic tunnel oven, Leidenheimer returns to traditional hearth methods that are updated by automatic loading, zone temperature and steam controls and unloading systems.



neither would the muffuletta sandwich have much identity sans its round, Frisbee-shaped crusty rolls.

For new Orleans bakers, restaurateurs and consumers, the key word is "crusty." A flaky, tender crust – one that crinkles as it cools into a distinctive "alligator

skin" pattern – is what the New Orleans market wants.

It's also what an increasing number of out-of-state food service operators want. New Orleans style po-boy and muffuletta sandwiches are becoming new favorites throughout Louisiana's neighboring

states. Demand from out-of-state gave Leidenheimer Baking one more reason to upgrade its plant and technology.

As a bonus, the company's new Werner & Pfleiderer automatic tunnel oven, which joined several rack ovens, allowed the bakery to return to traditional methods.



The spiral conveyer installed between the oven line and the packaging room assures rapid, uniform cooling while minimizing handling.

"With the new line, we've gone back to the way French bread was always baked: on the hearth," said Robert J. (Bobby) Whann III, president, G.H. Leidenheimer Baking Co. "And the loaf is now one of the best I've ever made. It's the traditional French bread, baked the tradi-

tional way. That's what distinguishes us."

Expansion of the historic bakery, located near downtown New Orleans, solved congestion problems for route and distribution operations and cleared the way for the pending additions to makeup, proofing, packaging and freezing capacity.

"This change has given us more confidence to move forward," said Robert J. (Sandy) Wahn IV, vice-president, G.H. Leidenheimer Baking Co.

PAST AND FUTURE. In 1996, G.H. Leidenheimer Baking marks its 100th



Celebrating 100 Years in business during 1996, G.H. Leidenheimer Baking continues under strong family management, directed by Vice-President Robert J. (Sandy) Whann IV [left] and President Robert J. (Bobby) Whann III [right]. The bakery serves a demanding market: Many customers require multiple deliveries throughout the day, packaged in large paper bags to maintain the bread's characteristic crispy thin crust.

To residents of the Crescent City, bread means French bread, and they have strong brand loyalties.

"People in New Orleans are more aware of our style of bread than they would be in any other city," Mr. Whann said. "New Orleans consumers are either sliced white or French bread eaters."

He continued, "We bake the majority of our products from one formula, period." This includes all po-boy and French rolls, the bakery's main products. Leidenheimer Baking offers only a few variety items, including a seven-grain bun, which takes a different formula.

GROWTH MARKETS. "Today, one-fifth of our business is out-of-state," said Mr. Whann.

These products are delivered to users frozen. "You can freeze French bread," he continued, "but you have to know how to handle it afterwards." To reconstitute frozen French bread, he recommended that the frozen loaf be placed in a 350 F (175 C) oven, directly on the rack, and heated for four minutes. Getting customers to do this correctly requires some education.

"One of our high-volume customers is

quite a stickler for getting his operators to use the bread properly," Mr. Whann said. "He doesn't thaw the loaves but tops them and then puts the whole sandwich into a traveling toaster that he had built. It's perfect. This lets the juices soak into the bread, like a true New Orleans muffuletta. It's the best way to handle the bread."

Locally the increase in tourist and convention business has created new opportunities for Leidenheimer Baking, too. "Hotel and restaurant chefs are looking for more European styles of baked foods," Mr. Whann said. The bakery added seven-grain products and supplies artisan-style loaves through contract relationships.

As a supplier to the city's constantly expanding food venues, the bakery works hard to meet customer needs.

"We're committed to responding to market needs, of chefs and restaurants," Sandy Whann said. "This is how we position ourselves to rise with the tide. That growth involves different production challenges."

EXPANDING OPERATIONS. Market expansion and customer excitement induced growing pains for the bakery. In fact, de-

year in business.

"We're the oldest French bread bakery in New Orleans," Bobby Whann said, telling how his grandfather got started in the early 1890s at a location a few blocks

from the current plant. In 1905, G.H. Leidenheimer incorporated and moved operations to the bakery on Simon Bolivar avenue.

Since taking over management of the baking plant in 1972, Mr. Whann has steadily moved from all-manual methods

to automation. His son Sandy joined the bakery in 1986, Father and son divide bakery management duties between them, with Bobby controlling finances and Sandy operations.

In 1990, the company purchased the route system and trademarks of its biggest competitor, Reising's Sunrise Bakery.

Not only did this add the Sunrise brand to Leidenheimer's market leader ZIP brand, but also it expanded route operations and product demand. Sales rose accordingly, and business conditions improved.

Today the company operates a dozen or more routes out of its bakery. Several independent distributors carry Leidenheimer's ZIP brand west to Baton Rouge, La., and east to Biloxi, Miss.

mand began to strain bakery operations soon after the Reising's acquisition.

"We were looking for a capacity increase," Mr. Whann said. "We were baking around-the-clock just to keep up."

The plant's stingline makeup system, installed in the early 1970s, was capable of high output than the rack ovens. As demand rose, there was always a bottleneck between the makeup line and the ovens. Could they raise throughput yet maintain or improve quality, they asked.

The Whanns also wanted to improve freshness, a key issue dictated by New Orleans market needs. Many of the bakery's restaurant, food service and institutional customers require up to three deliveries a day.

"We wanted a later bake time so bread could be fresher," Bobby Whann said. "And we knew that direct hearth baking would produce a better product."

LEARNING OPPORTUNITY. Research into oven choices took the Whanns to other bakeries to see state-of-the-art hearth baking systems in operation. Like Leidenheimer Baking, many were members of various baking industry organizations. Often, the visitors from New Or-



The bakery calls attention to the city’s ”cultcha” with new graphics for its new fleet of leased vehicles.

mated four-zone tunnel oven from Gemini Bakery Equipment operates in the bakery. It joins six Dahlen rack ovens put into service during the early 1908s, when the plant upgraded from four Peterson reel ovens.

Installed near the end of 1994, the new oven required an extended startup period. Although the bakery did not have the new line fully on-stream until April 1995, it was able to “get the kinks out” during the summer months.

“Our customers were very understanding of the effort we made,” Mr. Whann said. “Finally, through adjustments in temperature, time and steam application, we have the bread quality where we want it. Even our most difficult critics have been satisfied.”