

ON A MISSION

The camaraderie is as thick in the air as the smell of baking bread: it's easy to see the bakers enjoy each other and enjoy what they do. They work and chat and joke while a small radio on the shelf fills the gaps between the conversations.

Two bakers cut and scale dough along one side of the bakery, while a group of three others shape and mould the pieces. Another baker deftly opens the deck oven and peels out crusty loaves onto waiting cooling racks.

At first glance, there's nothing out of the ordinary about the unfolding scene. The smells, the props, the noises – they're typical of any bakery. But this isn't just any bakery. It's St. John's Bakery. It's a bakery with a cause. While its bakers care for and nurture the bread they produce, the reverse is also true: in its own way, the bread cares for, nurtures and works its magic on them.

St. John's Bakery is a social enterprise, run by Toronto's St John's Mission and supported by the Toronto Enterprise Fund, a funding partnership between the United Way and three levels of government. The bakery's mission is to make quality, preservative-free baked goods, along with, according to its mission statement, providing a "nourishing environment that responds to the needs of all those who contribute to the creation of these products."

The people who do that come from a variety of backgrounds, most of which generally don't include baking. Some are placed by Toronto Employment and Social Services, sent to gain valuable working skills in an environment that will welcome them as many might not. Others come through the mission. Others are in transition, or simply looking for a place to contribute a bit of their time.

"Everyone starts here as a volunteer. Most come from social services or from the mission in need of a meal and help," says St. John's baker Jeff Connell. "We'll give them a shift or two at the bakery and get started on training in different aspects of baking. Through a natural attrition and natural selection process, some people emerge as bakers and little by little they find their niche here."

The bakery found its niche with St. John's Mission shortly after Father Roberto Ubertini opened the mission as a small drop-in centre on Blake Street in Toronto's Riverdale neighbourhood more than 20 years ago. Located in the heart of a public housing project, it offered a place to connect and commune with neighbours.

One of those neighbours was Joe Link, who ran a bakery a few doors down. Link quickly became a regular at the centre, dropping in often with freshly baked bread and sweets. When trouble forced him to close the doors of his bakery, he brought his mixer to the mission, continuing to feed the centre's visitors that way. When Link died, members of the mission continued his work, baking from the basement of the mission's new home on Broadview Avenue, just north of Queen Street.

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Stanko

Father Roberto says baking bread just seemed a natural fit with the mission's vision and purpose. "Breaking bread together is a symbol that speaks by itself," he says. "The actual production of it is very healing: you can see the fruit of your work, the hands that have made it and shaped it, the smell and taste. It's very gratifying."

Connell explains it a little further.

"We place a high value on work – it has many rewards above and beyond the paycheck," he says. "Many people have trouble getting into the workplace and need a place to be productive."

For many, that place has become St. John's Bakery.

When the Toronto Enterprise Fund was set up a few years ago, Father Roberto and other members of the mission saw the opportunity to grow the bakery into its current incarnation. They acquired more equipment, a deck oven, and the location in the storefront directly beside the mission on Broadview.

St. John's Bakery products have also evolved and grown over the years, making the switch to crusty, sourdough products after Father Roberto spent a year on sabbatical learning how to bake in a 300-year-old wood-fired oven. The product line includes a range of products, from sourdough baguettes and loaves of Red Fife to country rye boules and English muffins, along with sweets such as cookies, scones and tarts. Customers who buy those products range from those who stop by the retail location on their way home from work to restaurants to butcher shops to high-end food shops to independent grocery stores. The bakery puts out almost 1,000 pieces a day.

Just how is it, with such a revolving roster of staff, many of whom have never set foot in a bakery before, St. John's manages to produce such a consistently gorgeous-to-look-at and delicious-to-eat product? Despite the rotating collection of bakers and helpers and volunteers, a core group of about five bakers have been with the bakery from the start. All of them started out as volunteers, all of them come from different backgrounds – and all of them have become devoted to the bread they make.

"We bake a bread that is easy to be proud of," says Connell, "and pride in your work is important."

Then there's the number of experienced volunteers who contribute their time to the bakery – people like Pierre Danielo, a baker from France who is a friend of friends of Father Roberto's and who is helping out in the bakery for a few months.

"I came to share my experience," he says simply.

Longtime volunteer Stanko Stankov doesn't have prior baking experience, but he's been helping out in the bakery for five years. He sums up one of the key reasons for St. John's success: a simple understanding that the bread is in charge.

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