

## St. John's bakers knead a new life

**Mission's bakery creates popular artisanal breads and cakes, but also aids those who are struggling**

December 23, 2008

**PAOLA LORIGGIO**

Staff Reporter

At a time when everyone is counting pennies and tightening their belts, it may seem extravagant to spend \$14 on organic fruitcake.

Yet the brick-size loaves – studded with dried cranberries, currants, raisins and candied ginger – are flying off the shelves of St. John's Bakery, a social enterprise in south Riverdale specializing in artisanal French breads and sweets.



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Jacqueline Urrutia holds a tray of bread at St. John's Bakery on Broadview Ave., which helps those facing hardships.

Owned and run by the St. John the Compassionate Mission next door, the tiny bakery, known for its crusty sourdough and crisp baguette, has developed a devoted clientele over the years, one so far undeterred by the nascent recession, says manager Hilda Tzavaras.

That's because each dollar pays for more than (admittedly great) baked goods – it helps support the bakery's outreach program, which trains people coping with addictions, disabilities and other hardship to work the ovens or the store.

"By purchasing our products, they're not just getting the best value, they're also helping a lot of other individuals who are always struggling – not just recession strugglers, like us," Tzavaras says.

For Gordon Brown, one of St. John's lead bread bakers, the bakery was "a platform to rise above" crack and cocaine addictions that plagued him for 15 years, he says.

A formally trained chef, Brown, 53, was bouncing from rehab to transitional housing when he heard about the bakery from a welfare office nearly five years ago.

He signed up to volunteer 25 hours a week in exchange for his welfare cheque, but after six months, his "baker's touch" earned him a full-time staff position.

It wasn't always smooth sailing. Brown lost his job in May 2005 when his addiction got the best of him, but a stint in detox – along with weeks of research on mental illness – helped him get back on the wagon and into the bakery. "This place gave me something to believe in besides crack," says Brown, who now moonlights as a motivational speaker, caterer and soon-to-be-teacher of kids' cooking classes at the Beaches Recreation Centre.

On a typical morning, St. John's bakers man the ovens, hand-shaping loaves and rolls from the bakery's dozen or so varieties and decoratively slashing the tops.

Most breads are available year-round, but some, such as sour cherry and chocolate bread, appear only at special times, like Christmas.

A few times a week, pastry chef Flavia Poon takes over the kitchen, mixing up buttery scones, flaky galettes – and, these days, several loaves of moist, aromatic fruitcake.

Her recipe has done a lot to repair the often maligned cake's reputation. One recent morning, samples disappeared within an hour.

"Something very nurturing happens in a bakery," says Tzavaras, who lends a hand behind the scenes whenever it is needed.

"Everything that we do has to do with our people."