



## Breaking Bread at La Farm

Lionel Vatinet is Cary's Rising Star Baker

BY JILL WARREN LUCAS

FOR LIONEL VATINET, there's not much difference between love and baking bread. In fact, without both he would not be the happy man he is today: owner, with his wife, Missy, of La Farm Bakery in Cary, North Carolina; father of two beautiful little girls; and expectant parent of another precious arrival—his first book, *A Passion for Bread: Lessons from a Master Baker*.

Vatinet's mother urged him to experience various apprenticeships as a teenager in France. He learned quickly that he was not meant to be a plumber or mechanic. But the first time he felt sticky dough on his fingers and saw the magic of yeast and fermentation, he was hooked.

He felt the same way after meeting Missy at a bread expo in Chicago. "She walked by and tasted a sample of my ciabatta," he says. "What can I say? She fell in love with the teacher."

For the next two years, he continued teaching baking in San Francisco and she managed two bakeries in Richmond, Virginia. They met often across the country, combining romantic visits with the business of finding the ideal location to open a shop. They wanted a well-educated, international customer base—one without an artisan bread bakery. She eventually suggested they consider Raleigh and made plans to visit her uncle in Cary.

They never made it to Raleigh. Fourteen years ago, in a shopping center near the upscale Preston community and close to the high-tech beacon of Research Triangle Park, they opened







La Farm. The bakery expanded four years ago to include a popular café. They provide breads daily to five Whole Foods markets and started a mobile operation that's part of the local food truck scene.

While happy to make his home in the South, Vatinet sounds as if he never left France. His accent has no hint of twang, though his daughters, Emilie and Lea, giggle in the familiar y'all-speak of their parents' chosen home.

**TLP:** Describe the challenges of operating a French bakery in the South.

**(Lionel Vatinet) LV:** The South is known for biscuits and softer breads, sometimes with additives that make them last for weeks. We believe bread is an everyday commodity. We do slow fermentation breads with good crust. The beauty of the United States is the people have a lot of imagination. Baguettes are the big business in France, but here people love sourdough and our signature La Farm bread. It's like the hearty loaves you find in the French countryside. **TLP:** The La Farm name reflects your field-to-table approach. How have you incorporated Southern ingredients?

**LV:** Last year we started sourcing all of our wheat and rye from Carolina Ground (a project of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association). We create one bread that is 100 percent wheat. It cannot be more local, and the flavor profile is incredible. We also use local honey, which enhances the flavor of the wheat and is good for your immune system. When I was a kid, breakfast was grilled bread with salted butter and local honey. It is a souvenir of my youth.

**TLP:** And you've won over customers with a non-traditional cornbread.

**LV:** Southern cornbread is about baking soda, but I use yeast. We use Yates Mill cornmeal and three types of onion. It starts as a boule, but you

press your elbow in the middle to make a hole, like a big bagel. It's rich from the buttermilk but soft with a nice chewiness. The first time people see it they are confused. The next time they ask for the Frenchman's cornbread.

**TLP:** How else have local tastes influenced your recipes?

**LV:** When we first opened in 1999, I made an American-style rye. One of my Eastern European customers told me, "Lionel, this is not rye." I told him to come back next week and I would surprise him. It's now 60 percent rye flour, no caraway seeds. I don't try to compete with legends of Grandma's bread from across the Atlantic, but this was a good change.



**TLP:** How do you incorporate seasonal ingredients?

**LV:** We use a lot of apples and raisins, and we make pumpkin and cranberry breads. We also make a Beaujolais bread using wine instead of water. For the holidays, we have stollen and a Linzer challah with cream cheese and raspberries braided in. Our yeasted dinner rolls are something we make only for holidays. They are puffy and buttery and very soft. We encourage people to order in advance. We are happy to have lines, but we do not like our customers to be disappointed.

**TLP:** You just built a wood-burning oven to offer instruction at home as well as at La Farm.

**LV:** My passion is to teach and have people not be intimidated by bread baking. I want them to be successful making bread at home and for it to make them as happy as it has made me. At home, we have a big butcher-block island where the students make bread. It is where I tested all the recipes for the book and where most of the photos were taken.

**TLP:** How did you get so much creative control with A Passion for Bread?

**LV:** The original contract said I could have 80 photos and 60 recipes. I am a perfectionist by nature, and my book focuses on technique. You cannot learn to make bread if you cannot see what things should look like. In the end, I have about 60 recipes and 470 photos. You don't see that often.

**TLP:** Do your daughters like to bake?

**LV:** They like to make a mess. I cannot resist them. They love to handle the dough and taste little bites. Their cousins like to have the crust cut off of sandwiches, but when they were teething, we gave them the ends of baguettes to chew on. They warm my heart.

La Farm breads may be ordered online at [lafarmbakery.com](http://lafarmbakery.com).