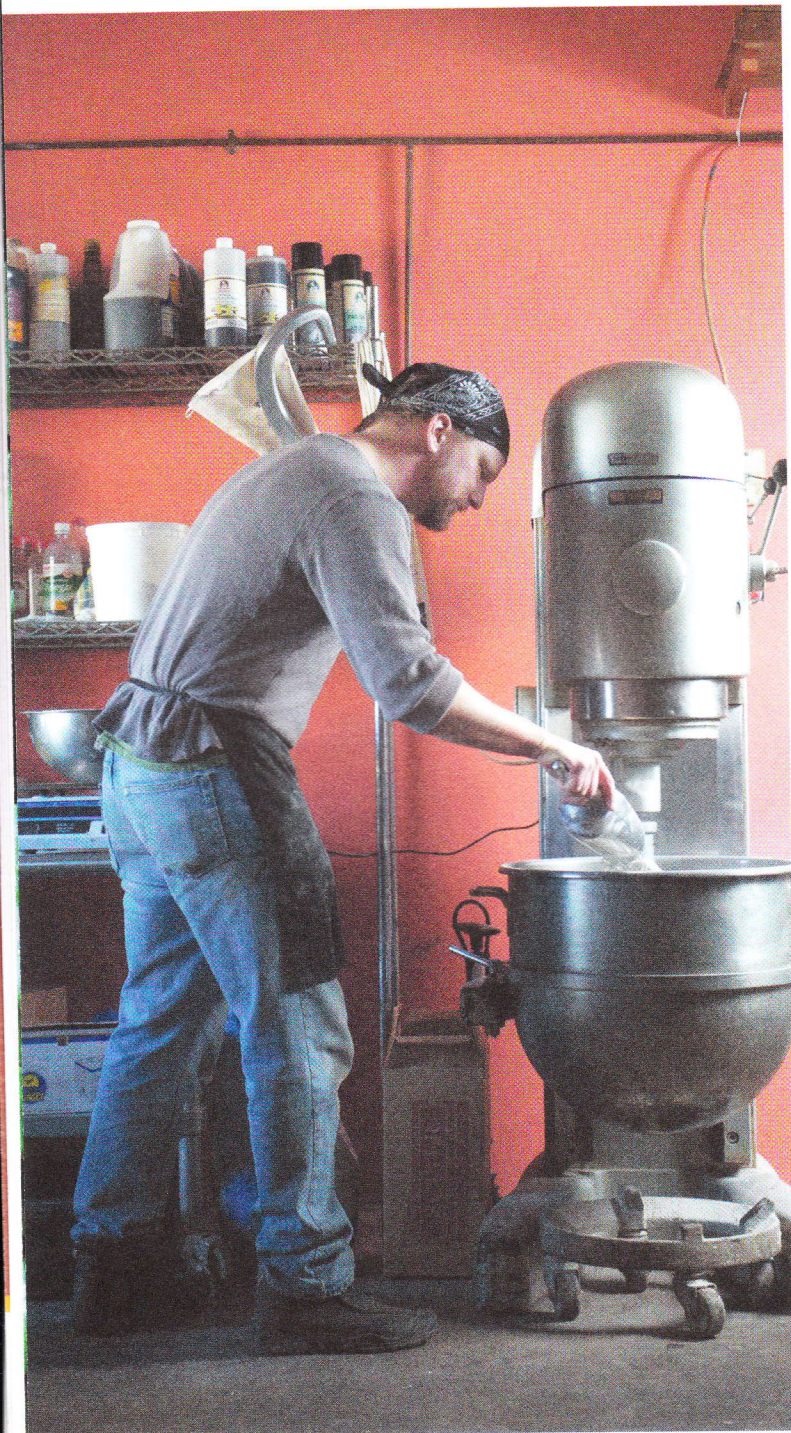


# OUR DAILY BREAD

*Artisanal baking (before it was “precious”)*

BY PATRICK DECKER □ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER MAY



As a crisp new day breaks over the Sunday morning “coffee & moccasin shuffle” of Rhinebeck’s winter farmers’ market, Yoni Cohen stands behind his beautifully merchandized, albeit collapsible, display-for-a-day. He’s engaging in salesman pleasantries with a middle-aged woman who, through her jeweled spectacles, is eyeing up a loaf of French peasant bread. Handing her purchase back to her wrapped in its unassuming paper sleeve, Yoni thanks her and adds, “I’m sorry, miss, but we don’t slice the bread here.” Befuddlement becomes her as she rebuts, “You sell bread, right? I want my bread sliced.”

This out-of-context, slice-of-Rhinebeck moment should not at all be confused with poor customer service. Yoni prides himself and his family’s brand on providing anything but. You see Yoni’s family—the powerhouse behind Chatham-based baking company, Our Daily Bread—are true artisan bakers. So much so, in fact, that the aforementioned exchange is a result of the expediency and care with which the freshly baked bread is handled.

To understand fully what this means, let’s take a look at the process of baking bread, which, in the case of the Cohen family, is not a far cry from the journey they have taken to grow a very successful business.

## Step 1: Mixing

*No matter how heirloom a recipe, proper mixing is the crucial first step taught to every aspiring bread baker. The right ingredients, in the right proportions, worked for the right amount of time, are the essential foundation to any successful dough.*

Zvi Cohen is the mastermind of Our Daily Bread, a nearly five-decade-old, family-owned bakery and café nestled in the unassuming town of Chatham. A 50-something boisterous Jewish father with an infectiously fastidious zeal for life, Zvi left Brooklyn for a life upstate in the late ’70s. He, by today’s standards, can be acclaimed as a true Renaissance man; a real Jack-of-all-trades. His academic background in education brought him a brief tenure as a technology teacher at a local school before he settled in as a baking assistant for two men who were running that decade’s incarnation of Our Daily Bread: a local haunt famed mostly for cookie-cutter breads and rolls akin to the commercial loaves we know from the shelves of today’s supermarkets.

Zvi is born from a culturally rich background of bakers steeped in European traditions. When the gold stars earned from schlepping buckets of water and sacks of flour earned him enough credibility with the bakery’s owners to have an opinion, he introduced them to the concepts behind “Old World” baking (or as we know it today, “the artisanal food movement”).



Bread (in some form or another) is regarded as the staple food of populations worldwide and, upon initial creation, was cooked fire-side on a stone slab known as a hearth. Hearth ovens are still pretty common today, utilized for a novelty factor in an open kitchen and, more importantly, as the engine of any truly artisanal bakeshop. Hearth slabs (with the help of a few other essential chemical reactions) are the reason bread emerges with the three C's: crust, crackle and crumb ("crumb" being the term used by bakers to reference the inner texture of bread).

Zvi brought this shift in equipment paradigm to Our Daily Bread a few decades back and replaced white Pullman loaves with sourdoughs and European ryes the likes of which had, at that time, been the standard for European tables for centuries, but not so much in the U.S. Today we take for granted our bountiful supermarket displays of ingredients like dry active yeast. The bakers in Zvi's family, who taught him the craft, did not, however, have such ready access to these ingredients. Their "dry active yeast" was a flour and water mixture (called a "starter") that relied on the habitation of naturally occurring yeast for leavening. Zvi's approach to bread baking shook up Chatham. Big time.

As the years went by, Our Daily Bread's popularity and menu offerings grew with the town of Chatham. Swelling to a population of just over 4,000, the quaint, comfortably paced streets of today's Chatham see a boost in foot traffic on the weekends from an influx of second-home owners. A town whose namesake earned local ubiquity on the Old Chatham packages of cheese today, also points its spotlight on bread production. Our Daily Bread's in-store bakery case is loaded daily with classics like ciabatta and onion rye breads, fruit Danishes and cinnamon buns, cookies of myriad varieties, brownies, scones, muffins and more. Those craving a more substantial meal can sit down with a newspaper and coffee over quiches, waffles, soups, salads and sandwiches (made, of course, on house bread). Their handcrafted baked goods are also incredibly well traveled as they jaunt from the café bakeshop's ovens at the point of Main and Kinderhook Streets in Chatham to weekly (and sometimes daily) farmers' markets in Rhinebeck, Troy, Schenectady, and New York City's Union Square.

## Step 2: Shaping and Proofing

*With so much time and energy invested in mixing together any given dough, the baker is next challenged with conceptualizing its final shape. Boule or bâtard? Knotted or twisted? Roll or...well, who doesn't love a roll. Perfectly formed portions of dough are left to mature and rise—"proof" as they say in the biz—in order to achieve their incredibly desirable, soul-satisfying texture.*

It wasn't just Zvi's business that grew, he also found some time to start a family. Enter Yoni and Gavrio, his two sons. Zvi's badge of eternal optimism and contagious entrepreneurship are torches passed down to two of the three fruits of his loins (Zvi also has a daughter who is not involved with the business). The boys, 27 and 31 respectively, have been integral to Our Daily Bread's growth since birth. They also seem to be a perfect down-the-middle split of the skills that have made the family business so successful up to this point.

Yoni Cohen is the more reserved, operations-driven side of Our Daily Bread. Landing around six feet tall, his slender frame seems more inclined to lean against a table and observe rather than be the first to interject in a conversation; it's clear that calculated decisions

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are his thing. As their distribution network has grown, so has Yoni's scope. Once a pinch-hitter for missed baking, counter and delivery shifts, he studied Business at SUNY Albany. He now devotes his days (no two of which are alike, he assures) to balancing the company's books and keeping the ship in good working order.

Gavrio Cohen, clad for our conversation in a suave ivy cap and chunky knitted sweater, devotes only part of his time to refining the front-of-house of Our Daily Bread's marketing and customer experience. The rest of his day is spent as operating partner at his neighboring Chatham restaurant, Destino, a Mexican-style cantina serving casual fare and handcrafted cocktails. An interesting, and somewhat unexpected, place to land for a guy who studied biology in Philadelphia.

But that's the inspiring part of the most recent chapter of the Our Daily Bread story. As the appreciation and demand for Our Daily Bread's product has propelled the business forward, the Cohen boys find themselves magnetically pulled back to it. What Zvi was once able to do as one man is now the work of many. When asked "Why Chatham?" they retort without hesitation that "ODB" (as the boys call it; clearly using the acronym to imply a reference to the late founder of the legendary Wu-Tang Clan rap collective as well as a reference to their more contemporary perspective on a 40+-year-old family business with a name rooted in the New Testament) works because of the synergy of their family and community. "This is my life," Yoni reflects. "It's hard to imagine it somewhere else. I have such a different appreciation for what my dad put in to making ODB what it is, now that I'm actually a part of it."

The third crucial piece of this maturation of a local landmark is the man behind Our Daily Bread's namesake product. Tim McGuire, affectionately deemed "Tim the Baker," joined the team in 2001 after a brief stint at Bread Alone and many years thereafter with the Omega Institute. Tim's adoration of bread and pedigree as a time-tested master baker were a perfect fit as a high-volume small-

town bakeshop was thrust into the popularization of the artisanal food movement.

Tim was brought on board the Our Daily Bread team just over 10 years ago to take over the day-to-day reigns from Zvi and keep the hearth ovens churning with delicious, simple bread made with Old World European techniques. His ponytail-clad, Bohemian *joie de vivre* often defaults to "go with the flow" mode. He's a salt of the earth guy who happens to make killer bread.

"Artisanal has gotten too precious," he pontificates. "Just do good work with functional methods and you'll deliver a delicious product. Period."

In today's sustainably biodynamic, farm-to-table world of food buzzwords, we can sum up our current pulse on food with the coveted term "artisanal movement." It's marketed as such a complex idea, but it's a simple equation really. The total product of an edible item's origin and eventual home is exponentially compounded by the subtraction of industrial processing and addition of a moral conscience. Curious part is, all this long division has been ODB's *modus operandi* from the start.

Rewind to Yoni back at the Rhinebeck market.

Our Daily Bread's ovens fire up at hours in the morning a bit too single-digit for most to comprehend. As the Kalamata olive breads and San Francisco sourdoughs come peeling out of the ovens, they're almost immediately packed into paper bags and loaded into trucks for same-day sale at the market. Being packed in paper sacs while still warm means that they'll cool properly, but attempting a slice at that point is a quick ticket to disaster. The bread must cool completely to set the crumb before slicing, otherwise it's just all smooshed down and unpleasant. Hardly a quality entry for artisanal USA. And hardly a reflection of a family's successful business model of using time-tested recipes, made with time-tested methods, to produce products that precede and will outlive trends.

### Step 3: Baking

*The coveted final step—the finished product—is perhaps the most flamboyant display of the baker's efforts. It's the unveiling. The prestige. The great "ta-da," as what were once puffy white lumps emerge from their cozy hearth as crackling, golden-brown beauties yearning for a new home in your belly. It's a transformation with awe-inducing severity.*

The Our Daily Bread team, understanding the difference between "following trends" and "staying relevant," is evolving into their next frontier of business: gluten-free baking. For a facility that has baked with conventional methods since inception, gluten-free baking brings new challenges to the table; first and foremost being that whole "no wheat" thing. Gluten is a protein that, when mixed with water, transforms into the structural component that stabilizes baked goods. Taking the proverbial spine out of a loaf of bread or a muffin means that those with an allergy to it can once again imbibe. The structure of the baked good is replaced with other "flours" made from things like rice, tapioca, potato or beans. While their integrity can produce an indiscernibly similar texture, the baker's skilled hand



must adapt to their needs, which almost 100 percent of the time are different than those of conventional wheat. ODB has persevered, turning their original shop into a “wheat-free zone” with a line of gluten-free products including (but not limited to) buckwheat and cinnamon swirl breads, chocolate chip and ginger cookies, carrot cakes, scones, pies and quiche.

For this community cornerstone, this change is so big it needs two buildings. This spring (they’re aiming for April) they’ll open a commercial baking operation with an attached second café a half-mile from their original shop at the cross of Hudson Avenue and Route 203 (adjacent to Gavrio’s restaurant, Destino). This location, which for the last several months has been operational as bread baking central, will continue preparing Our Daily Bread’s traditional offerings with an expanded capacity for production. Plans currently include a 60-ish seat café with waiter service and continued old-world touches like house-cured and smoked meats.

The original location will remain the same on the outside while they strip out the gluten inside. But you probably won’t know that upon initial inspection. “We’ve spent many months taking requests from people at markets for gluten-free products,” says Tim the baker. “Realizing that there’s a genuine demand for it in our community, we set out to retrain ourselves. We had to take methods that we knew worked and apply them to recipes that were a whole new frontier for us—all of this without compromising our values as a bakery. It was really exciting!” I guess an old dog does like a new trick now and then.

ODB has no intention of plastering “GLUTEN-FREE” in blinking neon above the door. “It’ll be referenced on our menu and sign,”

Gavrio says while gesturing at the lightly worn and welcoming awning. “But we’re confident that those seeking gluten-free foods will find us. We’ll let it be an ‘oh, by the way’ for our repeat customers who trust us to provide them with delicious, wholesome food...that just so happens to be missing the gluten.”

Over the bakeshop’s whirring symphony of mixers, speed racks and the smell of yeast, Yoni and Tim reflect on the future of their dad’s business (Tim, at this point, being an unofficial third son to the Cohen family). “This business is such an extension of my dad. He’s always had such big dreams and high hopes. He’s a walking vision statement.”

As he shares reflections of growing up with a dad who was devoted to his business and his family in equal proportions, it’s obvious how important merging the two was for Zvi. Yoni surveys the floor as the bakers begin their afternoon shift, looking through eyes filled with all of the self-effacing doubt that comes with a 27-year-old having the world as his oyster. He repeats his sentiment from earlier in the day.

“I just have such a different appreciation for it all now that I’m truly a part of it. We’ve seen how far sticking to our recipes, our methods and our community have taken this business.” Pausing with a nod reserved for modest acceptance of a passed ceremonial torch, he affirms “and where we can take it in the future.” ✕

#### OUR DAILY BREAD

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Our daily family from left:  
Gavrio, Yoni, Zvi and “Tim the Baker.”

