



Edible Artisan

## Rising Up

Little Sky Bakery's flavorful, naturally leavened breads  
begin with 100-year-old fermented starter

BY KRISTIN CONARD

Friday and Saturday nights are pretty much all-nighters for Tian Mayimin, founder of Little Sky Bakery. She's up working on baking some 100+ loaves of naturally leavened bread at her house for the Downtown Palo Alto Farmers' Market on Saturday and the Menlo Park Farmers' Market on Sunday mornings. (She's also at the Portola Valley Farmers' Market on Thursdays.)

Prepping starts days in advance to get the right timing for fermentation, depending on that week's flavors. Flavor options range from sweet to savory, including classic country bread, pistachio-filled challah, dill and dandelion, black and white sesame, chocolate cherry pecan and more, with Tian continually working on new flavors.

Loaves are shaped the day before the market and baked the morning of, so they are fresh and ready to go. It's a time-intensive process that results in crunchy artisanal loaves that all look unique and taste amazing.

"I love the product development part," Tian says, making breads based on flavors she personally enjoys like the popular raisin-walnut bread. But it doesn't always work that way. One of her signature breads features sesame seeds and hot pepper paste, a taste inspired from her family's home in northwest China. For some, it's a bit too much to handle. Tian grew up with that pepper paste, even before she was born. "When my mom was pregnant with me, she made these hot steamed buns that had pepper paste swirled in."

She also grew up noticing that her relatives who lived in the country would make steamed buns that tasted better than the ones they could buy in a shop. It was because they were made from a natural starter rather than a commercial yeast.

A natural bread starter is made by letting flour and water ferment and create its own mini ecosystem of yeast and bacteria. That process





*All in a baker's day: Yan stretches whole-wheat bread dough to develop its gluten, while Tian puts an egg wash on the orange and olive oil challah for the daily bread offerings.*

## Tian's 6 Tips for New Bread Bakers

1. Take active care of your starter. "It's like an animal. I take it with me when I travel." But once it's established, about a week or so, it's generally quite resilient.
2. Buy a scale so you can be precise with measurements. You should know exactly how much flour and water you've given to your starter each day.
3. Don't just use all-purpose flour to feed your starter. She uses half whole-wheat and half all-purpose flour.
4. Keeping your starter in the fridge, not at room temperature, will promote the growth of a different type of bacteria, which will change the flavor.
5. If you don't have a steam-injected oven, a Dutch oven works. Steam is necessary as it helps the bread rise and gives it a crunchy crust.
6. Seek out great baking reference guides and books. One of her favorites is *Tartine Bread* by Chad Robertson.

takes more time than quick-rising commercial yeast, and the longer fermentation allows for more depth of flavor in a base dough composed of just three basic ingredients: flour, water and salt. Some studies have theorized that natural leavening makes for bread that's easier to digest thanks to that long fermentation process. And as long as you keep feeding and taking care of it, a starter can be kept alive for decades.

Tian's starter came from her friend's mom, who in turn got it from her brother—and beyond that its history gets, as Tian puts it, mysterious. "My friend's mom said the starter started in Paris, went to Alaska, then went to Taiwan, then came back to California. It's been passed on ... for over a hundred years, and now it's a Menlo Park starter."

While baking bread consumes much of Tian's life, it's not where she thought she'd be. "I'm still really surprised to find myself a baker."

She studied philosophy and law and worked for years as a lawyer in Washington, D.C. One of her clients was a company that made physical products and the process was eye-opening. "I like working with my hands, and interacting with people a lot. I realized that I needed to explore that."

She left the law firm, moved to Shanghai, China, and opened a startup making cold-pressed green juices. After five years, Tian and her husband moved to Menlo Park, and while she knew she wanted to stay in food, she wasn't quite sure what or how. She started baking bread





Tian stencils the iconic California image of a bear and a star onto a loaf of the bakery's signature bread.

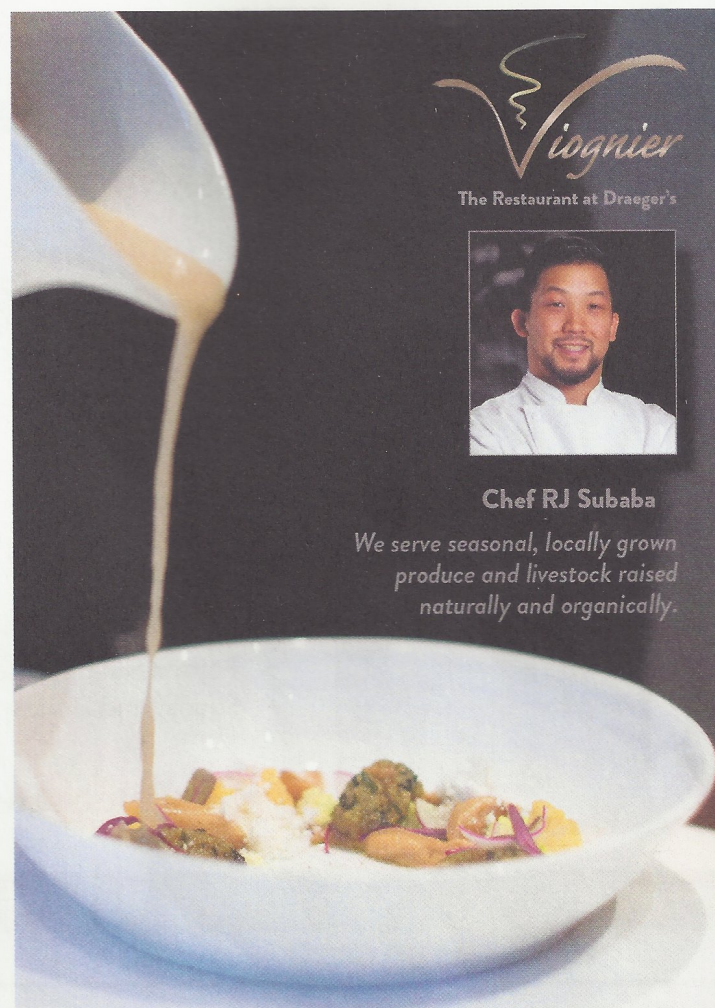
and when their families came for a two-week visit, she baked bread for them nearly every day. Once they left, she just kept baking.

Her business started with 50 little postcards delivered door-to-door in her neighborhood, looking for customers. Then it was 800 postcards, pop-ups at Café Zoe in Menlo Park and now three farmers markets. Working at the markets, she's noticed that bread is "seen by some as a staple and some as an indulgence." As Tian points out, "Either way, why not get the tastiest, highest-quality bread you can?" And she wants to bring that option to as many people in Silicon Valley as she can.

She still does door-to-door delivery in her neighborhood. "One of the most wonderful and unexpected things for me is how I feel like we're really part of the community. I didn't know it was going to be like that." ✕

*littleskybakery.com*

Kristin Conard is a Santa Cruz-based travel and food writer who grew up in Kansas. She teaches at Santa Clara University, and she's written for *Travel + Leisure*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Departures*, *7x7*, *BBC Travel*, *Popsugar*, and the oh-so-delicious *Edible Silicon Valley*.



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