

Award for Outstanding Achievement

Boudin at the Wharf

A TASTE OF SOURDOUGH

by Joe Kleiman

It's 8:00 am on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. The world-famous locale has yet to be inundated with the hordes of tourists that tread its sidewalks and eateries every day. But already at this early hour, one of the premier destinations on the Wharf is starting to do a brisk business as locals stop by for a cup of coffee or an egg scramble served in a sourdough bread bowl. This is the genius of Boudin at the Wharf: It's equal parts visitor center, tourism attraction, local bakery, and neighborhood eatery.

Replacing a 30-year-old demonstration kitchen and café, the Boudin at the Wharf building was designed by San Francisco-based architectural firm EHDD, and elements of its design recall one of the firm's other projects, the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Along its Jefferson Street façade, Boudin's open, inviting, huge windows allow passersby to watch the bakers at work while the smell of fresh sourdough and other breads waft over the streets. Seen from the Embarcadero, along the wharf itself, the building appears as an industrial warehouse, invoking the history of the company and its origins in San Francisco. The marvel of the design is that it blends into its surroundings no matter which side one views it from – whether the tourist attractions such as the Wax Museum and Ripley's across the street, or the working wharf behind.

On the second floor are the bakery and museum. The latter provides a self-guided tour through the history, science, and artisanship of Boudin. San Francisco as a city continues to wait for a permanent history museum to be housed in The Old Mint, a development that has been delayed for a number of years. Meanwhile, Boudin's museum meets this need, celebrating the region's past by showcasing the history of the California Gold Rush, San Francisco, and Boudin itself, all intrinsically entwined. The company, along with Levi Strauss and Wells Fargo, had its start during the Gold Rush, providing services (in this case, bread) to the thousands who came to the city and worked the mines in the adjacent Sierra Nevada. The mother dough (the "starter" preserved from one baking to the next) was brought over from France, and due to the microclimate of San

Francisco, the bread came out sour. In 1906, in the famous earthquake and accompanying fire that devastated much of the town, the mother dough would have perished had not Louise Boudin run into the burning bakery with a bucket and saved a small batch.

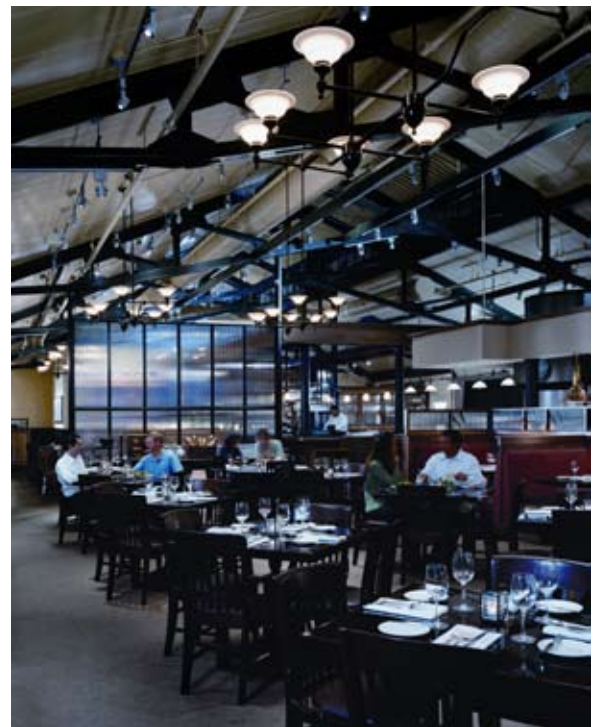
It is from this small batch of centurial mother dough that all Boudin sourdough is baked. The museum tour surrounds the bakery floor, with balconies overlooking the action. From a glass pipe connecting the bakery with the silo, visitors can watch flour race by at forty miles per hour, to the floor of the bakery itself, where artisans handcraft the sourdough and a number of other breads, the self-guided pace of the tour invites visitors to take their time and follow the entire process.

This working bakery supplies not only Boudin at the Wharf, but also the company's store on Pier 39 and a number of the Fisherman's Wharf-area restaurants. To transport bread to the popular bread store and deli in Baker's Hall on the floor below, an innovative conveyer system was built into the ceiling. Bakers place loaves into baskets which are then whisked above customer's heads and across the entry lobby to both establishments, dipping down from the ceiling for a retail expert to grab whatever's needed. The conveyance provides not only a vital tool for supplying the retail establishments with bread, but also a strong visual cue carrying forth the industrial theme of the bakery.

Sometimes, however, circumstances may call for other means of delivery. A few months ago, walking past the bakery, I was overcome by the delicious smell of asiago cheese in the air. When I went to the bread store, however, they were out of their famous asiago sourdough. The young lady at the counter asked me to wait a few minutes and suddenly the baker appeared in person, delivering a freshly baked loaf direct from the

oven. It is this kind of personal service that is felt throughout the facility, be it the casual dining and retail locations on the first floor, the upstairs fine dining bistro with its views over San Francisco Bay, or the museum itself, where docents such as Terry Hamburg guide adults and wonder-eyed children through the bakery tour, providing a personal sense of excitement and awe of the entire process.

Indeed, Boudin at the Wharf does not feel like an industrial visitor's center at all. If it were located in any one of the city's other neighborhoods, it would feel right at home. That's the magic of the place. It is for this reason that locals like myself continue to work our way through the crowds of tourists to visit Boudin for a sourdough bread bowl filled with clam chowder or a drink at the bar. Just as San Francisco is home to Boudin, Boudin at the Wharf feels like home to many of us and it is the perfect way to introduce visitors to the feeling of San Francisco.



The Boudin Bakery is a visitor attraction, a neighborhood eatery, a history museum and San Francisco's signature sourdough source.



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