

THEATER

Actor Richard Thomas talks about his life, from his John-Boy Walton Jr. role to his new one in *The Humans*. **2E**



ADVICE

Dear Abby tackles etiquette of socializing as a group, while Carolyn Hax tells how to encourage an apathetic partner. **2E**

COMING TUESDAY

Battling rheumatoid arthritis, pastry chef Catherine Ruehle turns to foods that help reduce inflammation.

DINING



Huge mixers get the bread-making process started at Empire Baking Co. on East University Drive in Dallas.

Photos by Louis DeLuca/Staff Photographer

Rolling in dough

Empire Baking gives Dallas restaurants their daily bread

By SARAH BLASKOVICH
Staff Writer
sblaskovich@dallasnews.com



Rolls glisten after coming out of an Empire Baking Co. oven. The bakery turns out 15,000 "pieces" a day, on average, 365 days a year.

Near the intersection of University Boulevard and Central Expressway in Dallas, you'll see DART tracks, a body shop and a big parking garage. A gas station. A Jack in the Box.

And you'll smell the delicious aroma of freshly baked bread.

Empire Baking Co. occupies a warehouse-looking building where the front and side doors are always locked. It's Willy Wonka's version of bread-making: busy and even a little magical, and not open unless you've been invited.

The better place to find Empire Baking Co.'s bread is, well, everywhere else. In addition to a retail store on West Lovers Lane in Dallas, Empire has built a bread empire in Dallas-Fort Worth. It supplies bread for the Adolphus Hotel in downtown Dallas, the Mansion, Al Biernat's, Goodfriend Beer Garden & Burger House, Parigi and many other restaurants. The company's employees bake

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HOBBIES

World Cup sticker collecting runs deep

Since 1970, soccer fans buy and trade to fill the pages of their albums

By CASSANDRA JARAMILLO
Staff Writer
cjaramillo@dallasnews.com

Carmen de Paoli remembers when her children would eagerly try to fill their World Cup Panini sticker albums growing up in Venezuela.

Now she's watching her three grandchildren do the same. Her daughter, Carmen Paoli, is still collecting and filling her album along with her kids.

"They love fútbol so much. This is a part of the passion that comes with the World Cup," the grandmother says in Spanish. "I'm holding onto the good stickers we found today."

The World Cup in Russia is still weeks away. But the excitement among soccer fans in North Texas is heating up ahead of the summer.

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Ben Torres/Special Contributor

Jammil Handal holds a sticker of Mexican soccer player Javier Aquino as he organizes Panini stickers at an exchange event at the Arepa TX restaurant.

Empire Baking rises to any bread challenge



Photos by Louis DeLuca/Staff Photographer

An Empire Baking Co. worker moves carts filled with trays of bread to ready them for the next step in the process.



A large mound of dough is cut to be fed into a machine to make rolls at Empire Baking Co.

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hundreds of hamburger buns, baguettes and dinner rolls for huge hotels such as Hyatt and Sheraton in downtown Dallas.

It's not all pinkies-up kinds of places, either: Empire supplies those wacky 10-inch hamburger buns for the giant sandwiches at the home of the Texas Rangers.

Chefs love the company because, they say, Empire makes some of the best bread in town.

"I don't have the facility to make as much bread as I need," says Robert Lyford, who is market chef for Patina Green in downtown McKinney and is an Empire customer. He's known for being obsessive about sourcing the products he uses in his restaurant.

"I say, do what you're good at and have the pros do what they're good at," he says. With Empire, "I'm starting with a better product than I could produce myself."

Empire's co-founder Meaders Ozarow says she's "intimidated by bread." When she and her husband, Robert Ozarow, opened Empire in 1992 in Dallas, they hired bread makers to make a product they believed restaurateurs wanted. They loved to eat great bread, but they were not bakers.

"I'm in awe," Meaders says as a team of her pastry chefs tosses baguettes into a hot oven.

Making bread is complicated. On one visit to Empire, two pastry chefs stood in front of a 12-deck oven at 460 to 500 degrees Fahrenheit. Each baguette baked for about 10 minutes, unless it was situated in a hot spot, which requires extra attention. Each deck of bread was on a different, and non-existent, timer. It was a well-choreographed dance as the pastry chefs scored the baguettes, tossed them in, shuffled them around and pulled them out.

"Everything, pretty much, is by eye," Ozarow says.

Said another way: This is not a job you could learn in an hour or two.

The pastries and breads wheeled out of the bakery are puffy and pretty. They don't give away the fact that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of variables that could make that day's bake go wrong.

The bakers are constantly thinking about the humidity. (Which they know "by feel," they say.) And the water temperature. (55 degrees, which, in the summer, requires adding ice to water before it's mixed in bowls so large, a giant could eat cereal in them.) And timing. (The bakery is open 24/7/365. Even on Christmas.)

Empire Baking Co. turns out 15,000 "pieces" a day, on average. That includes small items like croissants and larger ones like focaccia.

The recipes thrive on seven starters, the foundation of every bread product. Starters are made of flour, salt and water, which naturally ferment to become the "mother" — the beginning step to everything Empire makes. What's more, starters can die, so someone at Empire needs to "feed" the starters every six hours.

What if somebody forgets?

"It has never happened," Ozarow says. In the bakery's 25 years, employees of all kinds have been tasked with feeding the starters, from bakers to salespeople to the cleaning crew.

In the beginning, Ozarow says she "was begging people to come." Chefs would tell her that they give bread away for free at their restaurants. Why should they pay for Empire's?

Bread is hard to make well, that's why. Time consuming, too.

"It's totally worth it," says Graham Dodds, a Dallas chef who oversees the culinary operations at the Statler hotel's restaurants and bars. He buys Empire's product because it is better than what they could make themselves.

"They are always consistent," he says. "I can always depend on them to be exactly the same every time."

Today, Empire has been able to find chefs and foodies who believe in paying for bread. The company is also on the front end of interesting trends.

Sliders, for instance, were once hard to find. But now these small burger buns are on restaurant menus everywhere, and Empire makes 1,000 slider buns for restaurants in Dallas per day.

Same goes with brioche buns: Those are made with challah dough, and Empire has been making them since Day 1. But today? "Now even Jack in the Box has a brioche bun!" Ozarow says.

Empire now makes something like 550 baguettes, 3,500 hamburger buns and 220 croissants every day. Next time you're at a restaurant, biting into a slice of cranberry-cinnamon walnut bread or sourdough, you'd be right to wonder: Did this come from that building on University Boulevard?

Twitter: @sblaskovich