

HIS HEARTH IS IN THE



RIGHT PLACE

Coolidge, Arizona, is an unlikely place for one of the best bakeries in the state — it's pretty remote. Nevertheless, that's where Nicholas Ambeliotis decided to open Mediterra Bakehouse, which now supplies some of the best resorts and supermarkets in the state, including the Arizona Biltmore, AJ's Fine Foods and Whole Foods.

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BREAD IS PERHAPS MANKIND'S most relevant demonstration of chemistry. Such divine results from the mixture of so few ingredients: flour, water and salt. Sustenance is born from temperature and time. Some who have seen puckering starter ferment in buckets, floured hands shape dough and the unforgiving hearth harden a loaf's outer shell might argue the process is closer to alchemy.

On Main Street in Coolidge, Arizona, inside a nondescript stucco building, owner Nicholas Ambeliotis and his team at Mediterra Bakehouse move around the space as if choreographed, obeying the sensory cues they know from mixing, shaping and baking millions of loaves.

They're busy preparing the breads that customers have ordered for the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah — turning out turban loaves and challah on oversized baking sheets. A fine dusting of flour blankets the warehouse floor, and oldies blast from a single scratchy speaker in the corner. The employees tease each other like brothers. A few of them *are* brothers.

This crew starts at about 4 a.m., and feeding the starters — adding flour and water to them — is one of the first tasks of the day. Ambeliotis calls the feeding formula “sophisticated guessing.”

Ambeliotis has several starters, and each smells slightly different. One is a mild, European-style starter he bought from a renowned chef in Paris. It's 50 years old, and he paid \$50,000 for it 17 years ago. There's

Owner Nicholas Ambeliotis smells a loaf of bread at Mediterra Bakehouse in Coolidge. Doing so helps him tell how far along in the fermentation process the dough is.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Nicholas Ambeliotis holds two handfuls of Red Fife wheat, which is grown locally for Mediterra Bakehouse. Mediterra manager Dino Koulouris loads loaves of bread into the bakery's stone oven. Koulouris adds a decorative texture to a loaf.

also a San Francisco-style starter, which is much saltier and acidic, and a rye sour, which Ambeliotis got from a Jewish baker in New York's Coney Island 20 years ago.

While other bakeries use hot water and yeast to jump-start the process, Mediterra relies on patience and forethought. The starters that Brian Henderson, the head mixer, is working with today will not be used until tomorrow afternoon. They must ferment naturally. Eighteen hours. No proof boxes. No forced, artificial conditions. There are days when the team will go through 2 tons of starter.

Once Ambeliotis has fed the starters for the day, he starts mixing the bread dough. He takes the temperature outside and inside, then plugs some numbers into a meter. Hot and cold water run through copper coils and pump out water at the right temperature for the mix.

The industrial mixer has a paddle the size of an oar.

Mediterra produces 5,000 loaves a day during the slow season, triple that in the busy season. It sells to chefs at restaurants and resorts in the state, including the Arizona Biltmore and the JW Marriott chain, as well as to high-end supermarkets such as AJ's Fine Foods and Whole Foods. Sales aren't limited to Arizona, though. Ambeliotis started the original Mediterra Bakehouse in 2002 in Pittsburgh. It's about three times the size and production of the Coolidge facility, and it serves the Mid-Atlantic region.

Ambeliotis opened the Arizona location in 2012, and many of the employees have worked with him since then. Some even came with him from his Pittsburgh location. He calls them "lififers" and knows the names of everyone on the floor. Some of these guys have rough backgrounds, but Ambeliotis' criteria for hiring seems to be "Show up, work hard and be able to eat with the rest of the team." He figures, if they can't all eat together, they probably shouldn't work together. The



guys, in turn, appreciate the job's stability and don't mind the fast pace and early hours it requires.



AT THE BENCH, Richie West slaps the dough into shape, chops it into segments with what looks like a cleaver and tosses it across the table to Joshua Cambell, who shapes it into loaves. Calibrated by experience, they can sense the weight of a proper loaf without a scale. They double-check the weight to ensure they're not shortchanging customers, but their hands know this dough, and they're nearly always right. There's flour everywhere.

This crew is quick and scrappy — an assembly line with the cadence of an aerobics class. The way they move is evidence of focus, training, repetition and teamwork. Another team will come in later, in the afternoon, to package the bread, and another team delivers to customers. Someone is at the bakery from 4 a.m. to about 10 p.m. every day.

Jamall Jeffry is close by, guiding dough into a machine

that spits out everything from dinner rolls to burger and hot dog buns, depending on its setting. Deandre Alexander is using a modified paint sprayer to apply egg to some of the Jewish breads ready for the oven.

The hearth oven is 30,000 pounds of refractory brick. The baking surface, made of volcanic rock and vermiculite, is porous and insulated. Water inside tubes vaporizes as it zigzags through three decks and the fire chamber, creating a convection oven without any moving parts. Only about half the breads use the hearth oven; the others bake in appliances much more hospitable.

The tool Danny Rodriguez uses to put loaves into the hearth looks like a hand-held conveyor belt on a paddle. He spaces the loaves and uses a sharp blade to cut crescents — controlled vents — into the dough, like a magician yanking a tablecloth out from under the table settings without ruining the display. And he doesn't set a timer. Bread is simply a game of time and temperature control.

This is what food tastes like when it walks through a fire and doesn't burn.





Artistic cuts and designs not only show off Mediterra bakers' talents, but also give the bread an artisanal look.

This oven's terms are unforgiving, but used correctly, with the heartiest of breads, it produces a crisp, nearly caramelized outer shell — a counterbalance to the sour, and the perfect crust-to-crumb ratio. This is what food tastes like when it walks through a fire and doesn't burn.

Ambeliotis loves the bakery, but he also loved his job before the bakery. His previous career sent him to Europe for about six months of the year. There, he worked as a forager for an importer. Meeting artisans, he realized how much bakeries act as the lifeblood of communities and can do a lot to give back.

Back in Arizona, Ambeliotis visited the abbot at the monastery in nearby Florence for guidance. Before Ambeliotis said a word, the abbot said, "You should be a baker. You could help a lot of people."

So he started building Mediterra into what it is today. Although the bakery sells to customers across the country and has a tiny storefront, it also donates loaves to the Phoenix Rescue Mission and to area veterans' groups, day cares and churches.

Three years ago, the bakery took on a new and unusual challenge. Ambeliotis wanted to know exactly where his grain was coming from, and so the Grain Project was born.

Ambeliotis discusses ancient and heritage grains with the excitement of an 8-year-old at a birthday party. He works with a local farmer, Noah Hiscox, who owns 2,000 acres of nearby land where he grows and harvests heritage grains, including Blue Beard durum and Red Fife wheat. For the past three seasons, Hiscox and Ambeliotis have increased their yield. They don't yet have enough to rely solely on their own grain, but they're working toward its sustainability.

Ambeliotis likes to have control of his product from beginning to end. Working with Hiscox ensures his bread is free of GMOs and not hybridized or "dummy-proofed," like so much of the grain on the market today. He's discovered a quiet revolution of consumers who like knowing exactly where their food is coming from. The team uses the mill in the cooling room to process the grain for the bakery's all-purpose flour.

And every day, Mediterra Bakehouse transforms a simple illustration of chemistry into an investment in quality, accountability, sustainability and community. And really good bread.

Mediterra Bakehouse is located at 226 S. Main Street in Coolidge. To learn more, call 520-723-1853 or visit www.mediterrabakehouse.com. **AH**