

Crusty loaves

are these bakeries? bread and butter

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JON CHRISTENSEN
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Hard-crust breads are the most versatile, leanest and most traditional of breads. The opposite of soft, fluffy, balloon breads, they can be eaten at every meal, between meals and with sandwiches.

They also traditionally are the rarest breads in America's heartland. Columbus, however, has never been better-served for bakeries of authentic breads than it is today.

Even chain supermarkets carry crusty breads. But the summit of hard-crust breadmaking always has been the artisan bakery, where breads are made from scratch without preservatives, dough conditioners or other additives.

Locally, the oldest such bakeries are the two La Chatelaine stores, in Upper Arlington and Worthington, which turn out French breads using the levain method in place of commercial yeast.

Levain is a starter that is nurtured like San Francisco sourdough starters, but it doesn't give sourness to the finished breads. Rather, levain imparts an earthy nuttiness.

Significantly, many artisan bakeries in France use levain.

Notable at La Chatelaine are baguettes, round boules and country loaves.

The Short North's Eleni Christina bakery is owned by restaurateurs Kent and Tasi Rigsby. It's there that the Rigsby sourdough starter resides. Now 20 years old, the starter is the critical ingredient in the sourdough loaves featured at Rigsby's Kitchen and sold at retail in the bakery.

It's not very sour; that would interfere with the complex, wheaty flavors that permeate the crumb and the thick, chewy crust.

Eleni Christina's lighter, thinner-crust baguettes also are distinguished and certainly superior to those found in France. A thicker version, the batarde, is denser, less crusty and can be more easily sliced for sandwiches or toast.

In the North Market, Omega Artisan Baking has an extensive line of crusty breads, especially considering its modest square footage. Everything is done in the open; no walls separate the public from the operation.

Although Omega describes its baguette as a "mild loaf," it has plenty of wheaty flavor inside the thick, chewy crust distinguished by an irregular texture. During the week, it's available in a half size.

The standout loaf at Omega is the white Italian, but admirers of crusty breads also should try the mild sourdough, the French country and, for a truly chewy crumb, the rustic French loaves.

Much like the Chatelaines and Omega, Gahanna's Bread Basket is not afraid to bake its breads dark-golden, which helps develop flavor as much as the slow fermentation of the dough for which artisan bakeries are known.

This newest artisan bread bakery is notable for a chewy, crusty and well-risen loaf that it simply calls Italian.

Bread Basket's traditional French loaf also is crusty, chewy and flavorful. For less crust and slight hints of tartness, there's the sourdough ciabatta.

Because none of these bakeries manufactures breads, batch-to-batch variations, however slight, in the appearance and flavor of these handmade products will occur. Keep in mind, too, that, because the breads are made in batches (as opposed to being made on a continuous line), the bakeries do run out. That's an opportunity to try one of the other offerings.

noreservations@dispatch.com



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A variety of loaves at Bread Basket



CHRIS RUSSELL | DISPATCH
Bread from Omega Artisan Baking