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Although baking was in his blood, even Stephen had to undergo training before he could begin baking his now famous bread.

# Back to the FUTURE

*The owners of Morpeth Sourdough Bakery, Allison and Stephen Arnott can trace their family's connection to the historic bakery back to the 1860s*

BY KIRSTY MCKENZIE

Allison stands beside the original ovens, which they have crammed full of the "treasures" unearthed during the building's renovations.

**B**lame the new millennium. Or the enhanced awareness of family following the birth of Stephen and Allison Arnott's first baby in 2001. Or the fact that as a microbiologist, Allison had never studied history. And that marrying into the Arnott family awakened a previously unknown appetite for family history. Yes, those Arnotts. As in the famous Australian bakers, who are synonymous with arrowroot biscuits, not to mention Scotch Fingers, Butternut Cookies and Monte Carlos.

"Everyone knows the Arnotts have been baking in Sydney for more than 100 years," Allison says. "And it was kind of received knowledge in the family that Stephen's great, great, great grandfather, William, established a bakery in Newcastle in 1865. But William had arrived from Scotland in 1847, so it kind of begged the question of what he did with the intervening 18 years of the prime of his life."

So it wasn't until 2001, when Stephen and Allison decided to take their new baby for a trip to the country to see where Stephen's ancestors had disembarked at Morpeth, that the answer to that question unfolded. In the 1830s and '40s, Morpeth was a bustling port on the Hunter River, with more than 1300 ships a year offloading new migrants and their supplies and picking up wool from the stations in the Hunter Valley and points north and west.

"We were having lunch in a café and talking to the owner about Stephen's family having settled there so long ago," Allison recalls. "Then the café owner asked if we'd like to see the old Arnott's bakehouse, which was practically next door. Of course, we jumped at the chance. The owner was happy to show us around and it was kind of chilling to realise that we were in Steve's ancestral family home. On the way home I suggested we buy it. On impulse, we turned



HISTORIC ARNOTT BAKEHOUSE



MORPETH  
SOURDOUGH



MORPETH  
SOURDOUGH

The old Arnett's  
bakery has been  
brought back to life.



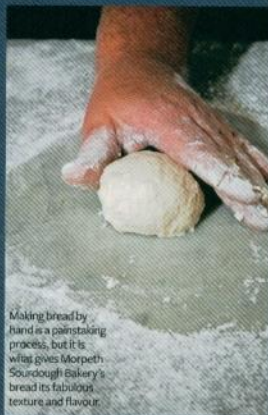
Stephen and Allison have developed a range of sourdoughs.

around and went back to find out if they were interested in selling. It was obviously meant to be because they were."

In the intervening years while the sale went through, Allison embarked on an intensive period of family research and discovered that William and his brother David had followed the lure of the gold

**"UNTIL THE ADVENT OF BAKER'S YEAST IN THE LATE 1890S, ALL BREAD WAS SOURDOUGH," ALLISON EXPLAINS.**

rushes to Sofala and Hill End in the early 1850s. Not having much luck on the fields, they turned their hands to making pies and bread for the miners. The enterprise was lucrative enough for William to return to The Hunter where he built his first bakery 1853 in Maitland and by the early 1860s he bought the Morpeth bakery, which had been established in the 1850s. In 1865, William met a ship's provender who promised to buy as many ship's biscuits as William could supply. William, who had



Making bread by hand is a painstaking process, but it is what gives Morpeth Sourdough Bakery's bread its fabulous texture and flavour.



The long hours of a baker are second nature to Stephen and Allison now.

learned about arrowroot from his stopover in South America on his way to Australia, moved his business to Newcastle where he established the Arnott's steam biscuit company, producing the hard, dry biscuits that stored well and provided sailors with a carbohydrate component for their sea-faring

diet. The rest, as they say, is history.

Having bought the building it was then a question of what Stephen and Allison were going to do with it. A bakery was the obvious answer, but biscuits proved too legally complicated. Stephen was a carpenter and joiner by trade but Allison's



## MORPETH SOURDOUGH

science background, in particular her years of research into natural preservatives for meat, meant that sourdough bread wasn't too far off her radar.

"Until the advent of baker's yeast in the late 1890s, all bread was sourdough," Allison explains. "It was a completely natural process where the micro-organisms that want to live on a grain of wheat were harvested to make bread ferment. In early America, brides would be given a piece of sourdough in their dowries to ensure their family always had good bread. But it was a slow process as the ferment takes up to 30 hours compared with a couple of hours for yeast-risen bread, so it was little wonder that bakers snapped up yeast-rising technology when it arrived."

More than a century later, it was a case of looking back to the future when Stephen and Allison decided to make their bread using the more natural sourdough technique.

"We wanted a completely natural, handmade product," Allison explains. "Sourdough gives a uniquely regional product in both texture and taste, as it's the micro-organisms from your particular region that give the bread its character. The famous San Francisco sourdough, for example, is made with a hyper acetic lactobacillus that gives it its unique flavour. It's called *Lactobacillus sanfranciscensis*. We blend our flour, which comes locally from Dubbo and Gunnedah, to give a consistency of flavour, but the unique taste of Morpeth sourdough comes from the



## OF COURSE, HAVING A BAKERY DOES NOT INSTANTLY MAKE YOU A BAKER AND STEPHEN HAD TO UNDERTAKE TRAINING BEFORE HE COULD BEGIN BAKING.

micro-organisms that like that particular blend of flour. We don't use any yeast and every loaf is hand cut. Our bread is low in fat, low in salt and high in fibre. It's naturally made and therefore a very healthy product."

Of course, having a bakery does not instantly make you a baker and Stephen had to undertake training before he could begin baking. And then there was the pressing matter of restoring the building, which was in imminent danger of "collapsing and slipping into the Hunter River".

Casalinga  
Ciabatta  
Olive Ciabatta  
Baguette  
Ciabatta Rolls  
Crusty Dinner Rolls

LEFT: The history of the site has been acknowledged with a commemorative paving stone.

"We were fortunate to get an emergency loan from the NSW Heritage office to repair the building," Stephen explains. "Being a loan, that meant we had to pay it back — and we also had to match the government's investment dollar for dollar, but it allowed us to do the necessary work to make the building safe and viable for a business."

The Arnotts were lucky because the building had only one owner in the intervening years since Stephen's ancestor had owned it, so everything was pretty much intact, albeit buried beneath five layers of lino. When they removed fibro linings, the original cedar panelling was found to be safely hidden. Excavations to restore the actual bakehouse revealed a veritable archaeological dig of artefacts, from Victorian shoes and pipes to beer bottles and fragments of china. The original Wunderlich ceilings have also been restored and the building is now in great shape for selling their range of artisan sourdoughs, which includes casalinga, ciabatta, whole wheat, fruit and nut, and five-seed breads.

"It's been a remarkable journey for what began as a family day out," Allison reflects. "There have been a few twists and turns that we didn't anticipate, but our lives are so much richer for our move to the country and return to Stephen's roots."

*Be sure to check out our feature on the township of Morpeth next issue — Ed.*