



« Hair To There

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The Big Mama of Bread

It is not often that people drive forty miles to get a loaf of bread. We did.

I've known Mark McIntyre, the owner, chef and chief baker at Norwood Cottage Bakery for years. His homemade artesian bread was rumored (on Facebook) to be sinful. As I recall, Mark was the one doing the rumoring. After roaming amongst babies, kids and dogs at South of the James (a farmer's market near Richmond), we found him in the back, grinning in the middle of a tangle of people. The rumors worked, or more likely these people had tasted his bread before.

"This is me full-time now." He grinned hugely and held out his arms in a sweeping motion to introduce all of his breads and baked goods. He named every baked item quickly, tossing in asides and tidbits that made each one sound like a character in a story.

"I get up at three am and start doing what I love. This is what happens."

He could sense my vapor lock at so many different kinds of bread.

"I'll make it easy. This is the big mama," he said, holding up a torpedo of crusty beauty called simply Norwood Cottage. Two large Labs on leashes stood, listening to him as if he were the bread whisperer.

"This right here," he bounced the loaf in his hand to test the balance. "This will change your life."

I took the bread and examined the golden crust under the cellophane.

"A woman asked if I could make a bed out of this bread," he said. "Best compliment I've ever gotten - well, on baked goods, anyway."

He pointed at the bread to emphasize every word, "Unbleached flour, whole wheat flour - both - black olives, garlic cloves, Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, herbs, yeast, cider vinegar, a bit of salt. Put a slice in the oven at 350 for 15 minutes to re-crisp the crust." His face turned wistful as he pinched his forefinger to his thumb. "It will be just like a little visit to France."

I thought about visiting France for a minute. Then we left with Mark's recommendation of a loaf of Norwood Cottage's big mama - plus Rosemary Parmesan and Red Pepper Flakes & Parmesan and Jalapeno Cheddar, a bag full. We started eating on the way home. We didn't say a word for 20 miles. It was that good.

Things just tastes different when they are grown by a couple named Earl and Winnie or homemade by a guy named Mark in his kitchen. These people would be growing and baking no matter if we were buying or not. It is their passion. It shows.

Perhaps man can live by bread alone.