Monks’ Bread

The Story of the Commercial Bakery at the Abbey of the Genesee

As a child growing up in the Finger Lakes region of New York State I vividly remember not only being quite fond of Monk’s Bread but actually aspiring to be like those holy men who were responsible for such a delight to the palate. This is a product expectedly familiar to many who live in the Rochester area, particularly for Roman Catholics who likely feel good about supporting their local monastic community when purchasing the delicious baked-goods. As I began toying with titles for this paper, one alternative that came to mind was: Monks Bread: Converting Customers One Slice at a Time. While somewhat borrowed and a bit trite, the title also would not have been entirely true. Cistercian monks would likely never purposefully descend to that sort of popular commercialism. The Genesee Trappists who produce the bread belong to one the most austere branches of the Cistercian order. Their notions of humility and work ethic are rooted in the 5th century Rule of St. Benedict and can be traced throughout a history of Cistercian observance which began in the late 11th century. So as not to be dependent upon secular society the Cistercians became self-sustaining communities who each carved out for themselves some sort of niche in the local economic landscape. The practice of relying upon benefices, tithes, rents and tolls was initially rejected by medieval Cistercians. Working with ones hands (another Benedictine principle) and earning their own way were connected to both their sense of independence and respect for monastic tradition (Rule of Benedict Chapters 48, 50, 57). In the 12th century foundational

The sixth step of humility is that a monk is content with the lowest and most menial treatment, and regards himself as a poor and worthless workman in whatever task he is given. RSB 7:49

Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor .. RSB 48:1

When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are truly monks … RSB 48:8

Cistercian document Summa Cartae Caritatis (XV, XIX, XXIII) it states that the lay brothers should manage these commercial affairs and that their contact with outside associations should be limited. Incomes tied to monastic businesses should be in keeping with self-sufficiency and
the purity of the order. While the Lay brothers of the lower social order initially carried out these tasks in the medieval period, in the 1960’s and 70’s those who were considered “real” Trappists were the men fully engaged in the physical labor. Today, whether it’s honey at Holy Trinity, preserves at Spencer, or Chimay beer from Belgium, the Cistercians have quietly continued to put their mark on commercial products.

Most of you know that the Abbey of the Genesee was the setting for Henri Nouwen’s famous Genesee Diary. Others are aware that their motherhouse at Gethsemani, was home to celebrated author, Thomas Merton. In 1949, when Gethsemani was just beginning to experience a crisis of overcrowding, newly elected abbot, James Fox, received a letter from a well-to-do attorney, Porter Chandler and his wife Gabrielle stating that they would like to donate a portion of their estate in western New York for the development of a new monastery. Chandler was a former Anglican who had chosen to convert to Roman Catholicism. Dom James once commented that Porter was a man who took his faith very seriously. Chandler had read an article about the growth of vocations at Gethsemani and became intrigued with the Trappist way of life.

In 1950 there were nearly 250 monks living at the Kentucky monastery (90 of whom were novices) in quarters meant to accommodate 100 men. Gerard McGinley (who was soon to be appointed Genesee’s first superior) wrote home to his family about Gethsemani’s conditions:

We have gone beyond the 250 mark... we are now stretching out for 300. Some 30 have been sleeping out in a tent during the zero weather. It was so cold in those tents that when they woke up in the morning they found their shoes frozen to the floor... This Christmas will be the happiest that has ever been at Gethsemani,
according to the old slogan, “the more the merrier”...

On Easter Sunday, March 25th, 1951 a small group of monks were assembled in a room at Gethsemani and told that they had been chosen to set up a new foundation. The Chandlers had arranged for the donation of nearly 1,000 acres of land to the Trappists. They began to arrive from Gethsemani to the Genesee Valley by car and had to stay in the Chandler family summer home for 4 weeks until the buildings on the property could be renovated. Construction of a brick guesthouse and 3 steel-frame buildings on the hill facing River Road began in July of 1951.

By November of 1951 the chapel at Bethlehem house was completed and the community sang their first Vespers (six on each side). In December several new postulants applied and were accepted. The farm was progressing well as they had managed to plant 140 acres of wheat before snowfall. However, for much of the first year the foundation depended almost exclusively upon outside financial support. By the Fall of 1951 they also had begun to organize a dairy assembling a modest herd of some 15 cows, 20 calves and a few yearlings. But what would literally be their “bread and butter” began as a suggestion from the early volunteers who were helping with the physical construction of the abbey. Many of the laborers took their meals with the lay brothers who were working on the buildings. These workers from outside the monastic community particularly enjoyed the bread that had been baked by the monks to be served with their meals. A number of the volunteers asked whether or not they might purchase some of the bread and take it home to their families. Since bread was a staple food of the community and the monks baked it regularly, this was not a
particularly difficult request to honor. Brother Sylvester, who served as a cook in the navy, had initially used the monastery kitchen to produce his popular bread. While serving in the Pacific during the Second World War, Sylvester would make as many as 400 loaves at a time for his shipmates. He recounted the story of the bread’s initial popularity in a 1972 interview with reporter Bill Lamale from the Buffalo Courier Express: “Some of the boys from Aquinas Institute [in] Rochester who helped clear the fields for the monastery were the first persons outside the religious community who wanted to take home some of the bread”.  

Given the numerous requests, Sylvester began to craft the bread into high-crowned loaves that were about three pound each and wrapped them in coarse market paper. He used the old oven in the kitchen of the farmhouse which served as the abbey retreat center. Guests and retreatants who came to visit the monastery also began to request loaves. Neighborhood stores soon asked if they could sell the famous bread to local customers. In 1952 a wooden structure behind Bethlehem was renovated, and it was there that the monks first began to produce (smaller) two-pound loaves for distribution. Peter Cleary took loaves to churches in the Conesus Lake area which could be sold after masses. Sylvester McGinley assisted in the initiation of a more profitable program for wider dispersal of the product.

Since dairy farming was originally slated to be the prime industry of the monastery, very little attention was given to the bread-making early on. The bakery first started in an old schoolhouse behind Bethlehem. There, with a small deck oven and a table mixer, the two-pound loaves were molded by hand. After baking and cooling they were wrapped in cellophane and sealed with an iron. Eventually the famous bread made its way to Rochester. Not only did the bread provide a welcome source of income but it also began to help cover the cost of the new monastic buildings. In a journal entry for late October of 1952 (found in the abbey archives among Fr. Gerard’s notes) we find him writing: “Our first snow, 2”. Sold 1,176 loaves of bread this week. This is the most yet for one week.”

The new metal buildings were completed by the end of October, 1952. On October 26th, 1952 the first Pontifical Mass in the new complex was celebrated by Abbot James Fox of the mother-house, Gethsemani. Five hundred people were present for benediction and the liturgy. At this time the community numbered forty-three members. By the Fall of 1953 the Genesee community
began to show signs of stability. Since their finances and plans for growth appeared to be in order, the Cistercian Abbot General (during September of 1953) was able to approve an elevation in the status of the Genesee “foundation” to that of an abbey. This would create a greater independence from the motherhouse and allow some semblance of self-governance. Dom James commented that it was actually quite unusual for a foundation to become an abbey so quickly (within 2 years) but the early success of their bread-making provided the Genesee monks with the requisite means to sustain a monastic community.

By 1953 it had become necessary to move the bread making operation up to the new buildings on the hill overlooking River Road (the old Sherwood property). However, they still continued to use rather simple equipment in their production process. Originally it was a two-man operation, but once they began to function in a larger facility, the community was able to increase productivity. Most of the labor in the bakery was done by the lay brothers. The choir monks would assist with some of clean-up. Before long, the Genesee monks began to regularly produce some 1,000 loaves a day (on the days they were baking). The community also decided to continue to implement their plan for a sizable dairy, using revenues from the bread-making to purchase a larger herd. Fr. McGinley had grown up on a farm in Wisconsin and was convinced that the dairy venture would prove to be beneficial to the community. By the Spring of 1953 they had 75 head of cattle. The choir monks worked clearing the land of thorn-apple trees and six miles of fence was installed to keep the cattle in pasture. While their dairy business was doing
well, the bread making began to take off. It became so successful that they began selling the bread by mail.

On April 19th, 1956, a completely automated bakery was inaugurated. There was a traveling tray oven and a professionally designed assembly line. A rigorous schedule had to be adopted in order to keep up with the output. The lay brothers stayed in the bakery throughout the night, working in shifts. The entire process took 8 hours. They started mixing at 12:00 a.m.; at 2:15 a.m. another group came in to mold the loaves; at 3:30 a.m. a third group of brothers placed the bread in the ovens to bake. The bread came out of the ovens around 5:00 a.m., then the slicing and wrapping began. The new bakery cost $63,000 to build ($22,000 was spent on the oven alone). That same oven is still being used today! During its first year in the new facility, using state of the art equipment, Genesee Abbey’s Monk’s Bread made an $86,000 profit. The plan for

Product information from the late 1950’s. These sleeves were often enclosed with Abbey of the Genesee mail orders or given to distributors. Gethsemani used similar labeling in the 1950’s to promote their cheese, fruitcakes and breads connected to their mail order business called “Gethsemani Farms”.

Right: The new commercial oven c. 1956
Left: Production line at the new bakery.
production potential in the new bakery was to turn out an estimated 40 loaves a minute. By 1957 they were producing over 52 loaves a minute! In 1957 the white and whole wheat sold for 27 cents a loaf, the raisin for 32 cents. 5 The automated system allowed them to package 4,800 loaves an hour. Of the community’s 62 monks, 17 were working in the bakery at that time.

So successful was the new bakery operation that it even earned a feature article in the national industry periodical Bakers Review. In 1958 profits jumped to over ¼ of a million dollars. Soon it became necessary to work with a distributor who would be able to bring the bread as far away as New York City. In 1959 the abbey entered into a contract to franchise out their product. Profits from the franchise alone reached ½ a million dollars by 1961. 6 Charlie

Above: Bakery in the late 1950’s. The 125 x 74 foot building was constructed by the monks themselves. An additional 90 x 35 foot building served as a storage facility for the bakery operation.
Vaughn from the Roman Meal Company gave some early franchise assistance. There were two main distributors, one in Rochester, the other in Buffalo. Bread was also shipped to Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Connecticut. NABISCO was involved in some of the franchising during the late 1950’s and early 60’s. Bond Bakers franchised in the South. After Charlie Vaughn left as franchise manager, Ray Bair became the new traveling manager who would come to oversee multiple franchises.

As I began to study the various advertising labels prepared by the distributors it seemed rather clear that the wrappers of the bread were attempting to send out strong messages to consumers (particularly Catholics). Was that message conscious and planned? I believe it was. While the Cistercians were not historically looking for charity they did view the success of their businesses as vital to the survival of their communities. Likewise, the Genesee monks saw their bread-making venture as an important business foundation. I suspect people actually felt they were doing something good by purchasing the bread. (I know my family did.) For the monks, was it an opportunity to advertise their lifestyle? Again, I think this is undeniable. Look at the right-hand wrapper below from 1959. It boasts:

*When you place this tall loaf of slender slices on your table, you are sharing the monks’ bread with them.*
In 1960, Ward Distributing, who was helping the monks to increase their market, enlisted the services of Grey Advertising. One of their ploys (as reported in the Nov. 22nd issue of *New York World Telegram*) was to pass out 1,200 loves of bread on the 5:29 p.m. rush hour train from New Haven to Stamford, CT. Below is one of Ward’s newspaper advertisements. This add also ran in the *New York Daily News*, October 13, 1960. The *Lakeland Ledger* in Florida called Monks’ Bread, “the bread that was never meant to be sold, the backbone of the Trappist Monks’ simple diet”. Dandee Bakers became one of the Florida distributors. They called it “the product of centuries of fine bread baking”. (Brother Sylvester’s recipe was certainly not centuries old.)

In a quiet green Valley, at the Abbey of the Genesee, an unusual group of men live and work. They eat neither meat, fish nor poultry, but subsist largely upon the bread they bake. This remarkably satisfying food has come to be known as “Monks’ Bread.” Now Monk’ Bread has come to New York. And today, you can share the same nourishing loaf that sustains the monks year in and year out through their rigorous labors. You will find it far different from any other bread. More truly satisfying. Heartier. The way bread once was meant to taste. You will even enjoy it plain. Monks’ Bread is now at your food store. Look for it in the tall loaf, in white, whole wheat, or raisin.

While the monks did eat a diet devoid of meat, they certainly did not “subsist largely on the bread they baked”. The Genesee community would eat the *cripples*, loaves that were not quite perfect enough to sell, but ate a simple diet of soups, vegetables, crops grown on their farm, and dairy from their barns.

The distributors and franchise bakeries continued to further play up the monastic angle in their advertising. In 1962 the Genesee monks directly hired the Rumrill Company to begin promotion of their products. Prior to this, the franchises and licensees were free to create their own advertisements. A 1962 Rochester newspaper add for the bread appears on the next page:
In 1963, an advertisement in the Courier Journal (the local Rochester Diocesan newspaper) proclaimed:

_This bread may very well make the best toast you ever tasted... Monks’ bread has a flavor you can’t toast away. It has goodness you won’t find in most breads. It’s a bread that wasn’t meant to be sold. It began as a simple sustenance for the monks at the Abbey of the Genesee. All the good things the monks baked into their full-flavored loaf naturally toasts up better. Try Monks’ Bread tomorrow, toasted._

The Monks’ Bread story continued to be told on the wrappers and inserts. While business was thriving there was never any pressure for the monks to alter their daily routine. In a 1962 interview with Bill Beeney of the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, Brother Clair pointed out: “we do not press for production, because that would cut into our religious life and defeat the entire purpose of the program”. A crew to 10 to 12 monks works in the bakery each day turning out what they comfortably can each shift.

So what has become clear is that a delicate
balance was sought between the commercial enterprise of bread-making and the routine of monastic life. When I was originally working on this material for my doctoral dissertation (in the late 90’s) my core adviser suggested I attempt to address the spirituality behind the famous bread. This seemed like a good idea. Most of us can imagine connections between the bread and the Eucharist, bread as the staff of life, or bread as a metaphor for both intellectual and spiritual food. I found an interesting quote in Thomas Merton’s Seven Story Mountain that connected the image of bread to spiritual teaching. Merton was referring to a letter written by the great Cistercian spiritual master, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, to Henry Murdac of York, sometime around 1128. (I will cite the original letter here.) Bernard wrote:

*If I could but have you as my fellow in the school of piety of which Jesus is the master... How gladly would I share with you the warm loaves, still piping hot, fresh as it were from the oven, that Christ of his heavenly bounty so often breaks with his poor. Would that when God sweetly deigns to shed upon his poor servant a drop of that heavenly dew which he keeps for his chosen...*

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, during his seven month stay at the Abbey of the Genesee, spent a great deal of time in the bakery. Yet he did not seem to make many connections between this particular type of labor and the spiritual significance of the bread. The closest he came was after his first day in the bakery when he wrote:

*After Lauds - the communal morning prayer at 5:00 a.m. - Brother Anthony put me to work in the bakery on the “hot bread line”. With baseball-like gloves I picked up hot bread... and put them on racks to be pushed away into the “cooling room”... When I saw hundreds of loaves moving in my direction I panicked. Brother Christian smiled and took a few of “my loaves”... Meanwhile, I meditated on the sentence “With sweat on your brow you shall eat your bread” (Gen. 3:19). Bread and sweat had never been closer together in my life.”*

Following that incident Nouwen hardly had anything good to say about the bakery, let alone any romantic notions linking the bread to the spirituality. The bakery is hard work and in its current mechanized state it is a very noisy place. The closest I could get to the Genesee monks reporting any spiritual connections to the bread-making was the Benedictine notion mentioned by a few of the monks concerning work (*labora*) being a form of prayer. Brother Anthony once commented in a newspaper interview:
Making bread or any other work becomes, for a monk, an act of prayer. Our work is an extension of the devotion we feel for God. Making bread or any other work becomes, for a monk, an act of prayer. Our work is an extension of the devotion we feel for God.  

With the changes in leadership at the Abbey of the Genesee came changes in the bakery. Abbot John Eudes (elected in 1971) oversaw upgrades and renovation through the 1970’s. Father Joseph initiated the construction of a loading dock at the bakery entrance after a number of brothers suffered back injuries from carrying 100 lb. sacks of flour. A short time after that they went on to install a bulk flour system. In the late 1970’s the bakery was upgraded with the installation of a divider, overhead proofer and Helimatic system for cooling the bread. Prior to the Helimatic system the bread was stacked by hand onto cooling trays. (Henry Nouwen told the story in the mid 70’s of having to remove the hot loaves with the use of using special oven mitts.)

The financial condition of the community and its Monks Bread industry were so strong that during the 1970’s it had been able to help start and sustain two daughter affiliates in the Third World. With the completion of the new Church, the gatehouse, the redesigning of space for a larger library along with technological improvements in the bakery, the community had positioned itself for a successful transition from the Vatican II era into the age of the contemporary Catholic Church. With the daughter houses, income from the bread became increasingly important. Parishes in Rochester sold it every Sunday to congregants. Generous donations (some 1,000 loaves a week were sent to soup kitchens). In 1973 a one pound loaf of white bread cost 50 cents. It began to steadily increase through the decade. Prices for ingredients began to double. Franchise production of the bread by Millbrook was at its peak. The monks
used the money they made from the bread they personally baked to support the monastery. Franchise profits were given to charity. There was pressure by Millbrook for the monks to increase production, but they stuck to a three day baking schedule.

During the 1980’ and 90’s a number of family brothers were hired to work in the bakery. Throughout the 90’s all able community members (some 35 men or so) spent time working the bakery shifts. The franchising of the bread operation ended in 1990. The community no longer needed the revenue and began to rely on local production, making some 15,000 loaves a day on bake days (Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday). They increased the varieties of bread, producing: white, wheat, raisin, sunflower, rye, and they also bake fruitcakes and brownies during the Holiday Season. Adding variety however has slightly cut down upon the efficiency of their operation. In the 1990’s, they decided to go back to using an independent distributor.
(Charles Lazio) which resulted in the need for increased production to over 39,000 loaves a week. In the late 1990’s the community began to once again develop franchise accounts with bakeries in Florida and Vermont.

During my 2002 interviews with several of the Genesee Family Brothers I again asked the same question concerning spirituality and the bread. Each one saw little if no connection. Again, this is a testament to the bakery being a hot, noisy, uncomfortable place where a rigor of schedule has to be maintained. Longtime Family Brother, Ross Cimino, expressed a certain peace and joy that he feels when delivering the bread to soup kitchens and food pantries in Rochester. He said the cab of his van often feels like his own personal hermitage. Maybe the realization of a spiritual link occurs with the consumer’s connection to the finished bakery product that is made by the hands of these holy men. The retreatants at the Abbey who break this bread at breakfast must certainly feel some gratitude toward the monks who made it. Might consumers (who eat and enjoy the bread) indicate an appreciation for monastic life through their offering of a slightly higher than usual price for this food? When the bread franchising took off in the 1960’s, the monks were careful to put the label “Made by Trappist Monks” on loaves which were produced exclusively at the Abbey.

Today the equipment has become even more sophisticated with the incorporation of computers into the process. Their mail order business is now highly dependent upon online orders. The graying of the community (average age is now 62) has caused them to hire a full-time group of laity to run the bakery operation. An advisory committee of monks still gives input and advice. There are 16 lay workers (in 2012) who work on the production lines, operate and repair equipment, drive delivery trucks and work in the business office. Some monks (15 or 16) are still involved in various facets of the baking. Normally the bakery produces 50,000 loaves a week which includes
10 varieties of the bread. Bake days are Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The facility is capable of mixing 1,000 loaves at a time and the machinery can handle 60 loaves a minute. Randy Colvin, a retired businessman (and former machinist at the abbey bakery for 7 years) is now in charge. He has helped the facility pass rigorous certification from the BRC (British Regulatory Commission) and the AIB (American Institute of Baking). The abbey is still associated with one franchise operation, the St. Armand Bakery in Florida. During my last visit (in 2012) there was some reported talk about converting one of the garages into a new production line (the abbey has always been a single production line) which might serve as a place for tourism where people could come and see the monks bake bread. This might possibly constitute a major shift toward future commercialism while at the same time furthering the 21st century awareness of the Trappist way of life (for a whole new generation).

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Above: Photo of trailer from the loading dock.
Right: At the loading dock, Brother Edward, who was visiting from Mepkin Abbey, looks on as Brother George Fyffe gets ready to load the finished product into the carrying trays. Today both men would be wearing hair and beard nets due to stricter AIB regulations.

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Footnotes


6. These figures and the statistics from the chart on page 7 come from hand written records kept by Brother Theodore who was one of the monks in charge of the Bakery from 1956 to 2003. I interviewed him during September and October of 2000. He showed me samples of the old mimeo-graphed forms they used when jotting down daily and weekly production.


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Bibliography


Chandler, Porter. Unpublished Autobiography. PRC Biographical Notes. Written by Porter Chandler between 1964 and 1977. A handwritten copy is in the home of Kathleen Houston, Geneseo N.Y. (Porter’s granddaughter). This is the copy I had access to while doing research. Typed copies are in the possession of Dr. David Chandler, Washington D.C. (Porter’s son) and at the New-York Historical Society, in New York City.


All photographs and labels (expect for the book covers for Rule of Benedict, Bakers Review and Genesee Diary) are from the Abbey of the Genesee archives and were used with permission in my doctoral dissertation. Rochester newspapers have also given permission.