



**GrowNYC Grains Interview
with Tyler Steinbrenner of ACQ Bakery**

GrowNYC Grains: What does the structure of your bakery look like right now? About how many loaves a week are you baking?

Tyler: I am baking 100 loaves 6 days a week. I sometimes have an assistant in the mornings, but am doing the bulk of the work. I have a double decker convection oven, and bake everything in cast irons. I am really proud of the system for actually functioning. A friend is doing deliveries. Folks can pre-order bread for pick up Tuesday-Saturday 4pm-7pm. We have a table out front with a bell to ring when picking up pre-order bread. It used to be you would pre-order and pick up the same day. I just changed the system yesterday, and already $\frac{1}{3}$ of the bread intended to sell for the week is spoken for. Because of the pre-order system, I am baking the exact amount that I need, with some extra to cover any minor errors. Whatever is leftover will be frozen, and I'll give it out if people reach out for community events. If the demand can support it, I'll open for retail on Monday. Operating a brick and mortar is costly. I am trying to make small changes to make it more sustainable. Growth seems slow right now, but I am trying to create a strong foundation. Anyone working here, I consider to be an apprentice. I try to diffuse any notions of hierarchy as much as possible.

GG: When did you start baking with local grains?

TS: I had been interested in (baking with local grains) forever. I was introduced to local grains in San Francisco baking for Dominique Crenn. They were sourcing grains farmed in Northern CA, not heritage, but organic. Then I started doing a lot of fermentation work. I started a small fermentation program back in 2014. Then I went to Thailand and cooked there for two years. I was curious about using local grains there, and simultaneously had an eye on a lot of the bakers in the Northeast and California, and I started thinking about starting a more serious breadcraft. It began in Thailand because I didn't have access to good bread, and started messing around with local flours. They were pretty unique, but introducing bread to SouthEast Asia is a slippery slope, because it's obviously a rice climate rather than wheat. I had an offer to open a bread and wine bar in Bangkok. I started doing menu design, and made a trip to San Francisco and New York for research. That was when it really blew up. I was drawn back to New York in 2019 after seeing all of the wheat varieties available. Once I got my hands on some of the flours from (GrownNYC Grains) compared to what I had access to in Thailand it was so crazy. I was baking a lot on the weekends, and then it's just been baby steps integrating more and more ideas.

GG: What role has the pandemic played in your project to start baking bread for your neighbors coming to fruition?

TS: I have seen a large psychological shift to people buying locally. Local food has been treated more seriously since the pandemic. People are thinking critically about how they want to spend their money. This shift to hyper local small scale embodies everything I wanted in a bakery. There is an insane amount of inherent compromise being made for the convenience we came accustomed to when it comes to the super grocery store. I am trying to position (ACQ) at the opposite end of the spectrum, working on building a model that works for super small independent bakers, but is also sustainable. It looks like I can continue to use this skeleton bakery model, that it can be my livelihood and I don't have to worry about scaling up. I have been taking meetings to try to get the business end more organized, because it is my first one. The strongest impulse about business is that if it's not growing it's dying. The truth is it doesn't need to be done as rapidly or in such an inflated way. You can grow slow and steadily and that's the way to build a real community. Instagram has been useful to spread localized news, but people have learned about ACQ largely through word of mouth.

GG: What role does using local ingredients play in your business? Have there been any obstacles you've had to overcome due to availability, and how did you handle that?

TS: I believe the only way to nourish oneself and community successfully in our current capitalist form of society is to literally use capital to support your neighbors. I'm very much of the belief that all systems that negotiate power must be decentralized. We all buy stuff, thusly, that capital needs to go back into the roots that exist around you in order for there to be a healthy environment to coexist in. Buying local agriculture feeds into that idea implicitly. You have to be supporting your local organic farmers if you're eating food, unless you want everything to be consolidated into corporate monocropping. That's not what we need for healthy ecosystems. Local organic agriculture is the only way we should be eating. There are cool luxuries we can mess around with if we feel like being decadent, but those should never overpower the local infrastructure of food. Unchecked hedonism is such a huge problem in how we take care of ourselves. Food is medicine and a metaphor for our system, and the way we eat is directly linked to wellbeing. An organic loaf of bread that is wildly fermented articulates all the theories that I wanted to approach. If rye berries run out, I will switch to another whole grain. If I have to change einkorn to red fife or spelt due to seasonality or harvest that's fine, that's great. It keeps me engaged with the process, and everyone gets to taste something different. I have run into issues with eggs in the winter. They are less available and are shrinking, which means the recipe can't say add x amount of eggs, you have to understand what the dough is supposed to feel like to know how many eggs to add. My model is simple with only three loaves of bread on the menu, and being the owner and laborer, it means I can be more fluid and dynamic about the process.

GG: What is your hope for your bakery in the next couple of years?

ST: Having a Greenmarket stall would be fun. As it is, I am at the market twice a week shopping, so it would be cool to be integrated into it and engage with the Greenmarket more. I want to continue focusing on skills and making better and better bread. I am distancing from the

pitfalls of focusing on issues of making money. A lot of people talk about goals of a business that go in that direction. I am constantly trying to reconcile what it means to feed people vs. pursue craft. They exist in tandem. I want to prove a point about organic agriculture by making extremely beautiful bread. With the right pairing of good farming with good baking, using ethically sourced organically grown produce, and hard work can create something exceptional. An underlying goal I have is to take on more apprentices and have them open their own micro bakeries. Taking the time to train people about this craft enables them to have this operation in their own community. Ideally, there would be hundreds sprinkled around the city. My bakery is being put on a pedestal right now because it feels unique. It shouldn't be unique, community bakeries sourcing locally should be an implicit part of our urban society.