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Loaves & Wishes

Maui bakers help dreams come true for their church

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The Holy Ghost Church Bread Ladies celebrate another morning of hard work and camaraderie and another sold-out batch of sweet Portuguese bread.

The Upcountry air is crisp and clear as Charles and Agnes Lopes arrive at Kula's Holy Ghost Church at 4:30 a.m. on a November Sunday. The Maui landmark affectionately known as the "Wedding Cake Church" because some say it looks like an octagonal wedding cake—down to the belfry and frosting-white exterior—is silent this early in the morning.

But not for long. Soon, the church kitchen will be a hub of activity, and the entire church hall will be filled with the seductive smell of Portuguese sweet bread. Roughly twice a month for the past 20 years, and sporadically for two decades before then, a rotating group of a dozen or so volunteers, known island-wide as the Holy Ghost Church Bread Ladies, has baked this bread to raise funds for the Kula Roman Catholic community.

Multiple Tasks

I'm privileged to join the volunteers today. When I arrive at the church, I see that some work has already been done. The day before, one volunteer cracked 25 dozen eggs, and another greased 275 bread pans. As the fluorescent church hall lights flicker on, the group gets busy. Soon the 40-quart mixer in the corner hums to life, and in 30 minutes, heaps of sugar, salt, flour, yeast, all those eggs, butter, cream, and a little secret flavoring become dough. Charles, who doesn't mind being known as a Bread Lady (the recipe is his mother's), transfers the dough into big plastic tubs for the proof box, where it doubles in size. Then he portions the dough by weight for Agnes, who rolls each hunk into a log, cuts it into seven pieces, and passes them on to the four or five women who are sitting and waiting at long tables.

With nimble fingers—and each with a distinct personal style—they form those pieces of warm, buttery dough into seam-free, perfectly smooth round balls, otherwise known as *bolings*, a Portuguese term. Seated alongside Harriet Tavares (the wife of a former Maui mayor and the mother of the immediate past mayor), I find my own rhythmic groove after some time and a bit of gentle instruction from Agnes.

Bread for Bucks

Some of the original Bread Ladies still participate in a tradition that dates back almost four decades, although it wasn't always such a well-oiled machine. Early improvisations included warming the dough with electric blankets. Baking continued intermittently until the early 1990s, when the congregation learned that the 1894 church building needed \$1.5 million worth of renovation. Charles knew how to help, and the

Bread Ladies resumed baking regularly and in earnest, raising half a million dollars, a few bucks at a time. "Dough making dough" is how Agnes describes the effort. With the award-winning restoration complete, they set their sights on the now-completed \$100,000 renovation of St. James in 'Ulupalakua, another church in the Kula Roman Catholic community. The baking continues because of the high demand. Each batch sells out.

Finishing Touch

After a second proof, the bolings get an egg-white wash, a maneuver performed only by volunteer Irene Otto or Agnes. "If any of the egg white drips down the side of the bolings, the bread gets too dark on the bottom," says Agnes. "I'm very particular about this step." Even in a church, the devil is in the details.

Finally, dozens of pans at a time go into the big deck ovens. The aroma is heady and yeasty. The loaves are ready 40 minutes later.

There is steady conversation—talk of grandchildren, politics, travel, Las Vegas winnings, food, and yes, occasionally the illness or passing of a congregant—and much laughter as the women work the dough, lay the baked loaves out on long tables to cool, package them in their custom plastic bags, divide them according to destination, wash every pan, and clean the church kitchen until it sparkles. This labor of love is hard work.

Being Portuguese is not required to bake Portuguese sweet bread. The Bread Ladies represent all of Maui's ethnicities, and at least two of them are in their 90s. "You have to have a love for it," says Harriet. "You have to have interest and devotion," Agnes adds. Perhaps a new generation of bakers will have the love, interest, and devotion to continue the Holy Ghost tradition. Because there is always another church project that needs dough.

Certified Pastry Cook Bonnie Friedman recently reviewed spicy restaurants on Maui for *AAA Hawai'i*.

Our Biweekly Bread

Each loaf that is baked is spoken for. Most go to folks who order the bread directly from the church (1-808-878-1091). Some go to the four Maui markets where it is sold (Morihara Store in Kula, Ah Fook's and Foodland in Kahului, and Takamiya Market in Wailuku); people know the delivery schedule and wait in line for it. Prices vary, but loaves are usually available for about \$5.50. Arriving early at the annual [Holy Ghost Feast](#) (June 11 and 12, 2011) offers good odds of snagging a loaf. Baked without preservatives, the bread has a two-week shelf life.

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