

## WEEKEND PREVIEW

## Dough master layers Bay Area with 'the perfect croissant'

**J**orge Alfonso, 70, didn't speak English when he came to the United States in 1959 from Guatemala, let alone know what a croissant was. Yet in his pursuit of the American dream, he mastered the art of making croissants and was deemed by Herb Caen in 1963 as making "the perfect croissant outside of Paris."

**Dish**  
*Cynthia Liu*

Alfonso's wholesale company, **Oven Fresh**, has been in busi-

ness since 1975. The bulk of his business is making croissant, Danish and puff pastry dough for bakeries, restaurants and other wholesalers.

Dough is made fresh every day to order, and orders are picked up within a few days. This means that more of the yeast is still alive and the pastries bake up big and puffy. Oven Fresh flash-freezes the dough and does not use preservatives.

In making croissant dough, Alfonso's company rolls out the dough, spreads butter over it, folds the dough over the butter, rolls it out again and folds it over three times. This process ensures many flaky layers in the croissant.

Upon cutting open a croissant, it's apparent when shortcuts have

been taken: The croissant will have fewer flaky layers and will look more like bread. In addition, one can tell whether pure butter or butter-flavored fats have been used. Oven Fresh's pure-butter variety contains more than 40 percent butter by weight.

Customers can choose between pure-butter, half-margarine and all-margarine dough. Margarine offers a cost-effective alternative for croissants used in sandwiches, where the butter flavor of the croissant can be overshadowed by the sandwich ingredients.

The company sells croissant dough in various permutations, from 15-pound slabs to 1-ounce precut and rolled pieces. Oven Fresh also sells Danish dough and puff pastry dough, from 5-by-5 squares to 15-pound slabs. The puff dough has no yeast and has been folded two turns, three times.

Not one to take shortcuts, Alfonso has always cultivated a strong work ethic. When he arrived in the United States, he picked fruit, did construction jobs and worked at a cannery. Using a book and record player, he studied English every night.

Within months, he landed a job as a dishwasher at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, but he was

more interested in the bakers than the dishwashing station.

"After working in the field and construction in the cold and the heat, it was nice to see bakers inside, in white clothes, clean and fed," he said. He became determined to work in that department and started helping them.

"They thought I was nuts for working for free, but I knew what I

bakers he had helped gratis for months were happy to vouch for him, and once he got the job, it was obvious that Alfonso knew how to bake.

Shortly thereafter, Alfonso was hired by the bakery division of the City of Paris department store on Union Square. He made brioche, Danishes, dinner rolls and croissants. Alfonso said he believes the

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was doing. I wanted to learn the trade," he said. His dishes would pile up because he was helping the bakery, and he would work two to three hours a day in unpaid overtime to finish washing the dishes.

When the head baker left several months later, Alfonso stepped up for the job. In order to get his foot in the door, he felt compelled to stretch the truth and say his father was a Frenchman who owned a bakery in Guatemala. However, the

City of Paris was the only place in the Bay Area making croissants in the 1960s and one of the few places that made them in the 1970s.

After a few years, he was the only one left on staff who knew how to make croissants. He served as a pastry chef at City of Paris for 12 years until the department store was bought by Liberty House in 1972.

Alfonso struck out on his own, opening the Amazon Pastry Shop, a retail store that made everything

from cakes to bread to pastries. He also sold his famous croissants to the concession stand at Liberty House.

"He got so tired at Amazon Pastry, we never saw him. He was gone from 1 a.m. to 9 p.m.," said his daughter, **Juanita Alfonso-Casillas**. Alfonso sold the business less than a year after he launched it. He found some front-of-the-house issues to be particularly trying — "A lady bought a cake and came back a week later with one slice of cake left and complained that the cake was too dry," he said.

In 1975, Alfonso found Oven Fresh Bakery for sale in Redwood City. All they had made was King O'Butterhorns. He liked the shorter and more regular hours as a wholesaler, doing business with culinary professionals instead of retail customers and focusing on just a few pastries. One of his bigger accounts was supplying 20 Costco stores with Danishes and mini cakes for 17 years.

The popularity boom of croissants in the 1980s was a boon for him because it fueled demand, and most bakeries did not know how to make them. Alfonso ended up buying a sheeter, a dough-rolling machine, to help keep up with the demand for croissant dough.

Then in 2001, he bought a \$300,000 laminator from Switzerland that could do the work of 10 employees by enveloping the dough around the butter and doing all the folding and rolling. Alfonso believes the laminator is more consistent and turns out a better product for his customers.

Oven Fresh has 10 employees, including Alfonso, who is semi-retired, and his three daughters. How does the Alfonso family feel about replacing people with machines?

Of course, the human touch gives the product more character, but Alfonso cannot turn out 10 batches of 500 pounds of dough a day by himself, and his employees are not as consistent in quality as he is.

"Providing our customers with our slabs of dough, made from scratch, allows the chefs and bakers who use it to have more time to put their own special touch to the product," said Alfonso-Casillas. "Some end users don't want to use machine-made croissants, but they also don't have time to make the dough, so they buy the dough to hand-roll them themselves and/or fill them with anything they want."

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