

A slice of heaven



Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein's challah and breads are out of this world. (Erik Vonhausen / Life at Home)

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Any baker worth his yeast will tell you there's something deeply satisfying about turning flour and other simple ingredients into fresh loaves of bread - whether for themselves, their families or their customers. For Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein, it's more than satisfying; it's spiritually and religiously significant.



"There is a statement from the Mishnah (the first major written compilation of ancient Jewish oral traditions): 'Without bread there is no Torah; without Torah there is no bread,'" says Rubenstein, the rabbi at Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs. "The idea is that a person isn't going to grow and learn spiritually unless their physical needs are met, but also that bread has a spiritual dimension in every culture around people sharing, around bread being a symbol of the gifts that the earth gives us, that God gives us. In all the baking and teaching that I do there's this spiritual element."



While Rubenstein's love of baking goes back quite a while, he didn't get serious until 2001, when he and his family went on a sabbatical to Costa Rica. Rubenstein began developing different recipes, but it wasn't until he came back to Saratoga that he decided to turn his hobby into a nonprofit business.



Once back in New York, Rubenstein graduated from his personal oven to the kitchen of his friend Rich Frank, who owns the Four Seasons Natural Foods Store and Café. That's when Rubenstein started calling his business Slice of Heaven. "It became very popular," he says. "People started to come in on Mondays asking for it, waiting for it to come out of the oven." Soon, Rubenstein moved over to the kitchens of Longfellows and the Olde Bryan Inn, owned by friend Steve Sullivan, because Sullivan had room for Rubenstein on Friday mornings. "I wanted to make challah," Rubenstein says. "Mondays just didn't seem right to make challah."

For those who might not know why the day of the week is important, challah is a yeast-leavened egg bread, usually braided, that is eaten by many Jews on the Sabbath (which starts at sundown Friday night), holidays and other special occasions. It also makes a mean French toast, and you don't have to be Jewish to enjoy it in any form.



From its inception, Slice of Heaven has always been about more than baking and selling bread. "My idea from the beginning was to have a project that would contribute to hunger relief," Rubenstein says, "so the very first check I wrote after working at Four Seasons for a while, aside from buying ingredients, was to the Saratoga County EOC (Economic Opportunity Council) for the food pantry."

About a year after starting Slice of Heaven, Rubenstein brought the business into Temple Sinai, with the blessing of the board of directors and a grant from the Alfred Z. Solomon Charitable Trust to build a new kitchen. At that point, Slice of Heaven became a true community effort. "(After I started) baking at the temple on Fridays, people started coming in to volunteer and bringing their kids in,"

Rubenstein says. "I started to make contact with agencies for adults with disabilities, so the mission expanded to not only raise money for hunger programs but to offer job training and socialization to people who could use it."

Every Friday, Rubenstein and his volunteers bake four different kinds of challah - white and whole wheat, with or without raisins - and granola (vegan, gluten-free and salt-free), made with organic flours and local ingredients whenever possible. Rubenstein, known as Rabbi Jonathan, practices a traditional Jewish ritual called separating the challah, which involves tearing off and burning a small piece of the dough. This is symbolic of the ancient practice in which priests were given a piece of dough to make sacrificial offerings to God.

"I use this ritual as a teaching moment," he says. "When I'm working with kids or adults, we talk about ingredients, where they come from and how even though we make the dough and form the loaves we could never make the sunshine and the rain and the wheat and the other vegetable and mineral ingredients that go into it. (This teaching) hints at the Jewish idea, which is also found in other religions, that the ongoing energy of creation is really a partnership between God and human beings."

Rubenstein sells his challah to customers on the Slice of Heaven e-mail list, many of whom pay extra to subsidize a bread donation program for local nursing homes and hospitals. On Wednesdays May through October, Rubenstein bakes and sells sweet breads at the Saratoga Farmers' Market, along with gluten-free chocolate chip cookies baked by his wife, Rabbi Linda Motzkin, also of Temple Sinai. The co-rabbis also offer year-round workshops on baking and scribal arts (Motzkin's area of expertise), which along with Slice of Heaven comprise Temple Sinai's Bread and Torah Project. All of the proceeds from Slice of Heaven go to the Bread and Torah Project, local food programs and other charitable causes.

Rubenstein believes the community aspect of Slice of Heaven is what gives it such broad appeal. "(It's because) so many hands are involved in it and we reach out to different populations, (plus) it's charitable and there's a spiritual aspect to it." A spiritual aspect that, Rubenstein says, transcends religion. "I think the teachings that underlie it are universal. I present them in a Jewish context, but they're not necessarily uniquely Jewish teachings."

As for Rubenstein, don't expect him to leave the temple for a full-time baking gig anytime soon. "I still like being a rabbi. It's my avocation," he says. "It's a creative outlet for me, an opportunity to teach something that I'm really passionate about." @

For more information about Slice of Heaven, go to <http://tinyurl.com/LAH-Nov09-locavore> or call the synagogue at (518)-258-5546. To get on the mailing list for weekly offerings, send an e-mail to sliceofheaven@nycap.rr.com

Read more: <http://www.timesunion.com/AspStories/story.asp?storyID=855035#ixzz0XkHfRHHK>