

Breaking Bread

Through their Massachusetts bakery, John Gates '84 and Stu Witt '84 are nourishing communities – and hearts – in the midst of a pandemic.

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John Gates '84 says he never tires of the smell of fresh bread. And there is a lot of it.

In West Concord, Mass., where Gates and SPS form-mate Stu Witt '84 operate Nashoba Brook Bakery and Café, their 16-ton French bread ovens can generate 300 loaves each per hour. It is not uncommon for them to produce between 5,000 and 6,000 slow-rise, crusty artisan breads in a single day.





Stu Witt '84 demonstrates his flair for baking sourdough bread. PHOTOS: Courtesy Nashoba Brook Bakery

The bakery operation, nestled along the bubbling waters of its namesake, Nashoba Brook, is fronted by a retail eatery, filled by an average of 300 customers per week-day and an additional 100 or so daily on Saturdays and Sundays. In that space, customers can sample the 12 varieties of breads, plus soups and salads, sandwiches and pastries, all against the backdrop of the larger bread-making operation, which can be witnessed through the large windows that surround the commercial bread kitchen.

The booming retail business was not in the original vision for Gates and Witt when they first agreed to start a bread business together back in 1998 on a backcountry hiking trip in South America with SPS friends David Ingalls '84 and Eric Sorenson '84. But 2019 turned out to be the most profitable year yet for Nashoba Brook Café. Open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, it generated an average of \$5,000 per day last year.

"The cafe is to bread what a brew pub is to beer," says Gates. "Big windows look in on our bread kitchen and out over the Nashoba Brook and wooded wetlands. You can watch the bakers forming loaves and then loading them into and out of the two 32,000-lb. bread ovens, or sit on a couch, drink coffee, and munch on a scone, watch the brook wind by a cobblestone retaining wall and under an old wooden footbridge."

But that changed on March 17, the date an order by Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker took effect; all restaurants and bars in the state would be closed, except for takeout, until at least April 6. The original order has lasted much longer than anyone could have anticipated. The shuttering of businesses to help slow the spread of

COVID-19 has limited Nashoba Brook's retail business to less than a third of what it was pre-pandemic, with transactions restricted to takeout orders from the most loyal customers. Gates and Witt have been forced to furlough about 50 percent of their workers, though they have kept most of the 15 bakers they employ, and sales to hotels, restaurants, and other small eateries throughout New England have come to almost a complete halt. Still, the bread continues to rise.

"I feel proud that we are creating a product that is so well received in this time of hardship," says Witt, "when people are desperate for some kind of nourishment. What better way to be nourished than by a great loaf of bread?"

When Gates and Witt initially imagined opening a bread bakery together more than two decades ago, they envisioned the retail shop as simply a home for the bread-making operation. But, fairly quickly after it opened on September 11, 1998, the café business took off. It took a slight recession three years later for the business partners to revert to their original mission of building a successful bread company. With Witt, the self-appointed "doughboy" serving as head baker, Gates began to solicit new business.

"I started going to every restaurant, café, big-box store, tiny gourmet market, breakfast place," he says, "and began building a wholesale bread and small pastry business."

Slowly but surely over the next few years, Nashoba Brook grew in productivity as the retail space continued to flourish. Today, they count among their wholesale clients supermarket chains across New England, including Hannaford, Shaw's, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, Stop & Shop, Crosby's, Donelan's, Roche Bros., and Big Y, among others. Nashoba Brook also has accounts with St. Paul's School and the Concord (N.H.) Food Co-op. Wholesale distributors Associated Grocers of New England and Bozzuto's are important conduits to the bread's wider reach.

While Witt had spent several years prior to opening Nashoba Brook working as the head baker for an artisan bread company in Burlington, Vt., Gates never expected baked goods to become part of his daily life. He completed law school at the University of Virginia in 1996, the same year his son, Jackson '14, was born, and with plans to practice environmental law (the six Gates children also include triplets Colby '17, Clío '17, and Fisher '17). During his two years as a stay-at-home dad, Gates went to visit Witt (bringing Jackson along), and fell in love with the traditional bread Witt was producing – featuring wild yeast and long fermentation times (enhancing nutritional value and making it more digestible) that bypassed the shortcuts most bread-makers take when they use commercial yeast to make their bread rise faster. Soon, Witt was sending fresh shipments to his friend to satisfy his craving for the crusty loaves.



Witt (l.) and Gates (r.) with former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick.



Nashoba Brook Bakery produces a dozen varieties of bread in various shapes and sizes. Some breads have been furloughed during the pandemic.

“We are pretty compatible,” says Witt of his partnership with Gates, with whom he played football and lacrosse at St. Paul’s. “John’s responsibilities are in maintaining the administration and coordination with people in the community, and he is very good at keeping detailed notes about what needs to get done. I am more of an artist, who is passionate about the outcome of the bread every day. We come from opposite perspectives in terms of our strengths. That makes for a good relationship.”

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nashoba Brook produced nine varieties of artisan bread. Sourdough, French, rye, and seven-grain were in the ovens seven days a week, while loaves of rosemary-garlic and raisin entered the rotation on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Olive, pepper jack, and harvest (featuring dried fruits and nuts) alternated on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. That does not count the moist-inside-crusty-outside Italian Pugliese bread or the variety of rolls that includes focaccia, ciabatta, and other specialty breads when time allows. Nashoba Brook breads also take different forms, from whole artisan loaves to bigger-sliced sandwich bread. The production sheet from the kitchen at the end of each day is often a page and a half to accommodate the multiple varieties of fresh-baked breads.

Over the last few months, since COVID-19 disrupted life globally, Gates and Witt have made the decision to temporarily discontinue the so-called “restaurant breads” – the ciabatta, focaccia, and the Pugliese. They also have eliminated the specialty breads that have for years dominated the night shift, and the pastry department has been furloughed.

“Even with that,” says Witt, whose son, Jacob ’16, also attended SPS, “we are baking the same amount of bread overall because we are supplying much more to grocery stores. The drop in business at the café is a big part of the change.”

The business modifications forced by the pandemic have given Witt pause as he looks at the steady labor costs that continue despite the change in operations.

“Our bread and butter is our sourdough, and production of that product has increased,” explains Witt. “Our overall revenue has decreased, but our labor percentage is competitive. We are learning the real efficiency of making sourdough bread, and it is reinforcing why we started the bakery.”

The day after Governor Baker’s order was issued, Gates and Witt held a meeting with staff and made the decision to furlough many of their employees. That quick verdict allowed Nashoba Brook workers to get to the front of long unemployment lines. Nashoba Brook also has applied for



It is not unusual for Nashoba Brook Bakery to produce up to 6,000 loaves of bread in a single day.

the government's Payroll Protection Plan to further ensure viability during the crisis. Masks are now required inside the retail and kitchen spaces, while plastic safeguards have been installed around the registers. There is increased attention to personal hygiene and to wiping down surfaces with more regularity. Those who remain on the payroll through the crisis must monitor their health and immediately report any flu-like symptoms.

To help make up for shortfalls in the café – and to offer an essential service to their community – Nashoba Brook has begun selling flour and yeast out of the retail storefront. A once scarce bread-by-mail program has been generating up to 40 orders a day through the company's website (slowrise.com), proving that individuals are willing to pay additional shipping costs to – quite literally – put bread

on their tables. Those with a hankering for Nashoba Brook sourdough can also order it online through Williams Sonoma, the kitchen giants.

"One of worst parts of this pandemic is that we are not able to break bread with friends and neighbors," says Gates. "The flip side of that is we get grounded in the community of our families. Bread is a fantastic symbol for what it means to commune with people. It still resonates as an important aspect of what we do by bringing soul-nourishing bread to the communities in which we sell."

The efforts of Gates, Witt, and Co. have not gone unnoticed by customers. Gates personally responds to e-mailed comments received through Nashoba Brook's website. One customer from New Hampshire shared, "I just wanted to let you know that, during this pandemic,



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your sourdough bread has become an indescribably important part of my daily life. Thank you for...being a comfort for everyone who has been lucky enough to discover your breads."

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Both Gates and Witt are grateful to "have something to do" during such an uncertain time. There are analogies to be made between the patience required for life to return to normal and the patience it takes to make Nashoba Brook's version of slow-rise bread. There is a saying in the bakery that "anything worth having is worth the wait." In their

kitchen, Gates and Witt follow a 6,000-year-old tradition of baking bread with a long fermentation time. It's an all-day process that requires between 10 and 12 hours from the time the bread is mixed to the time it enters the oven.

"The clock doesn't really matter when you're making this kind of bread," says Gates. "You mix it, you are checking the dough with your hands and looking for the gluten window that tells you when it's mixed. In terms of timing during the day, you follow the dough and it sets the pace. It's definitely an exercise in patience; you have to go slowly and have to pay attention. COVID has introduced its own set of complications. Maybe because we are so used to the slow-rise rhythm, it already had us well-positioned to take it as it was coming and continue to make bread the way we always have."