

Becoming a Baker

By ReadWorks

A baker's day begins early. So early, in fact, that for many people it would still be considered night. At 4 a.m., the only light typically comes from the stars, and even the birds are still asleep. The prospect of waking at 4 a.m. every day scares off many a would-be baker. But Diana Rodriguez didn't mind. She was in France, and she was doing what she loved. Diana couldn't wait for each day to begin.

On that morning, a cool, clear Tuesday, Diana arrived at the bakery as usual. She unlocked the heavy iron door and stepped in, breathing in the comforting scent of butter and yeast. Then it was the same routine as every other morning: turn on the lights, measure the flour, and mix the bread dough. Carefully adding salt, yeast, and water, Diana began to knead the dough. Over and over, she pushed the dough down into the counter, rolled it over and pushed it again. She had learned to knead bread dough from her grandmother, and she still found the practice soothing. Most bakers have defined biceps from the hours they spend coaxing flour and water into a smooth, elastic dough.

At 4:30 a.m., the head baker arrived. "Bonjour, Pierre," called Diana. "Bonjour," Pierre mumbled sleepily. Pierre was a native of this town, a quiet seaside resort in the south of France. As a local and a baker of many years, Pierre was less excited about getting up at 4 a.m.

Diana had first heard about Pierre's bakery when she was watching television at home in the United States. There was a show that toured the world, highlighting the best foods to be found. Diana had watched the host's face light up when she tasted one of Pierre's buttery croissants. Diana had wanted to make people feel that happy.

For years, she had known that she wanted to be a cook. When all of her friends were looking at colleges, Diana had stared at the websites of culinary schools. She went to the program at the local community college, and there she discovered her gift for baking. Baking was different from cooking. Baking was precise; it required attention. Measure just one of the ingredients wrongly and the entire batch would be ruined. You could be creative in baking, but you had to follow the rules carefully. It was like writing a sonnet.

As part of her program, Diana had to take on an apprenticeship. For six months she needed to work with a master baker, learning skills from him or her. The hours would be long and the work would be hard, but it would be an invaluable opportunity. All of the best bakers learned through apprenticeships. Diana knew that she wanted to be an apprentice to Pierre.

Now, kneading the bread in the kitchen, Diana was sure she had made the right decision. It had been three months, and already she was a better baker than many of her teachers back home. She had learned the light touch and quick reactions necessary for working with dough. Her biceps were defined from the hours of kneading bread and lifting heavy sacks of flour.

Today was the halfway point of her apprenticeship, and that meant there was a test. Diana didn't know what the test would be like, but she could tell it wouldn't be easy. Pierre was wide awake now, looking at her out of the corner of his eye, judging whether or not she was ready.

"Diana!" he called. "Do you know what today is?"

"Halfway through my apprenticeship," she said.

"That's right," Pierre responded. "Today is the first exam. If you do well, you will move on to more difficult tasks and will receive more responsibility. If not..." He looked at her seriously. "If you do not pass this exam, you will continue your apprenticeship at another bakery."

Diana felt her breath shorten. She felt like she was doing well, but who knew if her work was up to Pierre's standards? She couldn't imagine leaving now, just as she was building a home there. She finally knew some of the customers' names, and she had just mastered the signature *pain au raisin* of the bakery.

Pierre placed a list in front of her. It was the full list of the bakery's supply for the day. "Today you do all of the baking. Alone," he said. Diana felt dizzy—that was several hundred pastries and loaves of bread. Usually, it was Pierre, her, and another apprentice. Well, there was no time to waste.

Diana began to work furiously, mixing together flour, kneading loaves, folding pastry. She began to lose track of how many racks she was putting into the oven and which loaves of bread were ready to be pulled out. She glanced at the clock—7:00 a.m.! The bakery was supposed to open in one hour, and there was no way she could be done.

She picked up her cell phone and dialed the other apprentice. "Marie? Can you come in and help? There's just no way I can do this myself." Marie hurried over to the bakery, and together they managed to get the bakery supply ready on time. But even though the customers were smiling, Diana was holding back tears. She knew that she had been unable to pass the exam and now would be sent elsewhere.

At the end of the day, Pierre arrived. "Diana," he said. "Pierre, I'm so sorry—" she began, but he cut her off. "You have passed the exam!" he said, beaming. Diana put out a hand to brace herself on the counter. Pierre explained: "It's impossible for one person to do all of that work. You passed because providing good bread to the customers was more important to you than your own prestige. That's what makes a good baker."

Diana smiled. She hadn't imagined the test would be so hard, but at least it confirmed what she already knew: she was meant to be a baker.