

The Best of Bread

PRAGER BROTHERS, LOUIE AND CLINTON, BRING THE ART AND SCIENCE OF HAND-CRAFTED BREAD TO CARLSBAD.

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Outliers. The Prager Brothers are outliers after the fashion described in Malcom Gladwell's book of the same name. Everyone knows their bread, if not the brothers. Prager Brothers baked goods show up at corporate events and neighborhood block parties. Their loaves are recognized immediately by their artisan crust and alluring smell. And while brothers Louie and Clinton worked very hard on their business model and their craft, there were things baked into their success that even they didn't recognize until they looked back on their own story.

The Prager Brothers are Carlsbad raised. Trestle-jumping, Calaveras Lake rope-swinging, surfing Carlsbadians. Their education started at Buena Vista and then Kelly Elementary. They went to Valley Middle School and graduated from Carlsbad High in 2004 and 2005. From there, Clinton went to UC Santa Cruz, earning a degree in music, and Louie to Cal Poly SLO for a degree in plant biology. It was Louie's curiosity about clay, wood-fired ovens and pizza parties in college that was the starter for their eventual business.

After college they both traveled for a year. Louie roamed around the United States and joined Clinton for part of his year in Brazil, Argentina and Chile. Back home, they built a big oven in their parents' (Tom and Kathy's) backyard on Kelly Drive. They started experimenting with breads in Tom's converted shed and selling their prototypes to family and friends. Then they expanded to farmer's markets.

One of the keys to outlier success, according to Gladwell, is being in the right place at the right time. Louie saw a "for lease" sign in the industrial park they are currently in, though a smaller suite in a south corner. The landlord was persuaded by a good loaf of bread. He helped the city recognize the complex was already zoned for retail. They sort of rezoned it. They were in their corner spot for three years before moving to the larger spot they now occupy. This spot also has a great view of the farms of Sunny Creek Canyon.

About six months ago, they took over even more space next door and opened a pizza place. "It feels like we've come full circle," Clinton says, remembering those college days. "It's a good vibe here on the weekends; we have a hangout spot for friends and family, pizza and music." Mystery Train is the name of Clinton's rock band and The Prager Brothers' House Band is the brothers and other good musicians who are in town and can make the gig.

In "Outliers," Gladwell discusses the 10,000 hours rule: It takes that long to master a skill, which is about 10 years of disciplined effort. The brothers have been in business for 12

years. They are masters. And very serious about the quality of their product. "We mill our own grain," Clinton says. Two big granite stones grind the organic whole grain into flour. But what makes it artisan? "The more mechanized the process becomes," Clinton says "you lose quality." And that unique flavor. Machines are used for mixing the dough, but the loaves are hand-crafted.

Clinton is quick to praise the mentors that helped shape them. Richard Webb, Jules from Canada—a good friend who knows wood fire—and Jeff Yankellow. Yankellow coaches bakers in a big French competition. He helped the brothers with croissants, pretzels and pastries. Part of gaining mastery is listening to the masters.

"Business is relationships." The brothers also believe in knowing the farmers they buy from. And they believe in sustainability. One local farm, Schaner Farms in Valley Center, is where they get their eggs. Any unsold bread goes in a barrel and then to Schaner Farms to have water added to become feed for the chickens. Relationships with their employees matter immensely. There needs to be a good culture of camaraderie for the first shift that starts baking at 2 a.m. The last shift closes up at 8 p.m.

Gladwell wrote about cultural legacy. Clinton says his dad's ethic is in them. Their mom was an accountant. She taught Clinton and still helps out. He says Louie brings the science of sourdough to the table and he brings the art of business. Louie is currently in Washington State getting a master's degree in plant breeding and grain hybridizing. Clinton praises his brother's chemistry and biology expertise that forms their process. He credits music for teaching him "the discipline of showing up and doing it every day." And travel for making him fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, which helps with their 75 employees. "So much of what helped us become successful, we didn't even see coming."

Some rom coms would lead you to believe that to start a new, successful business you just have to follow your dream. There is so much more than flour, yeast and kneading that goes into the bakery and pizza shop. The mechanics of the mixers, websites and online ordering, accounting, HR, marketing—you need a team.

And, again a Gladwellian key, community support. "Don't get me wrong," Clinton says. "We worked our butts off, but the community was amazing." It's why people say at potlucks or holidays gatherings, "Have you heard of Prager Brothers?" The community recognizes hard work and top quality. It's why there is usually a line out the door and the artisan bread business is rising.

a) Enjoy your Prager Brothers bread on one of the sandwiches made in house. b) The new pizza place calls back to Louie and Clinton's early days of baking. c) Customers at the Carlsbad store (there are also locations in Encinitas and Hillcrest) are greeted by the friendly staff. d) Loaves are handmade with flour milled on-site. e) Croissants are also on the menu, along with various baked goods and desserts. f) The pizza place is a recent addition and often features live music.



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