Flour POWER

Maui Bread Company delivers tasty twist with traditional German eats, tropical treats

story by Todd A. Vines
photographs by Ryan Siphers

WHAT'S MORE INVITING than the aroma of fresh-baked bread? It's a scent so powerful that it triggers taste buds to water and stirs core memories of another place and time.

In Kīhei, the aroma of fresh-baked bread invites passersby to Maui Bread Company. The cozy bake shop in Dolphin Plaza has long been a local favorite for breakfast bites like muffins, cinnamon rolls and sweet buns. Since 2020, the shop has also been Maui's authority on traditional German breads and rolls.

The self-described "fusion gourmet bread shop" offers two distinct lines: "Hawaiian Artisan Bread" influenced by Hawaiian, American and Asian tastes, and "German Artisan Bread" influenced by European tastes. As a result, one may find a basket of baguettes near the passion orange guava (POG) bread, or a row of rye bread adjacent to ube (purple sweet potato) loaves.

The European influence was introduced by Steve and Christine Lange. The German nationals took ownership of Maui Bread Company in 2020, expanding the menu to introduce Old World items such as German pretzels and brötchen, small, round rolls eaten with meals or as snacks.

"When somebody orders brötchen, it will definitely tell you that this person is of German origin, or has been living in Germany," said Steve, who nurtures the island's hunger for the authentic recipes. "They just crave it. This is something you don't get very often in other places (outside of Germany)."



Maui Bread Company in Kīhei bakes fresh German and Hawaiian artisan breads, crafted each day by master bakers at the shop near Kamaʻole Beach Park I.





Steve and Christine Lange opened Maui Bread Company in 2020, featuring specialty Hawaiian and German Artisan Breads made from traditional recipes. Suzy Furga, one of a team of 14 employees, prepares baguettes for baking using time-honored techniques.

'Where is your German bread?'

It was the Aloha State's longing for German fare that inspired the Langes to move to Maui in the first place.

Germans have a well-earned reputation for making delicious bread, and there are countless traditional varieties, each with its own unique flavor, texture and purpose. When Christine visited Hawai'i for the first time in 2018, the Hamburg native found herself being asked a reoccurring question: Where is your German bread?

The unique interest in German breads – and apparent lack of any bakery producing them – made Christine ponder the possibilities. She told Steve they should open a German bakery in the islands, but he didn't take the idea seriously.

"I said, 'Yeah, sure honey.' It was a joke. And it was forgotten."

Christine traveled to Hawai'i the following year, and again found herself fielding inquiries about Germany's renowned breads. Back home, she was involved in naturopathy and holistic medicine. Her office specialized in gastroenterology, how food influences digestion, the immune system and overall health.

"I was open for other (career) thoughts," Christine said. "Maybe to go forward in my life, maybe do a break from what I'm doing. Maybe we should move to Hawai'i and open a German bakery."

She revisited the entrepreneurial idea with Steve by phone before returning home.

"She called me and said, 'Why don't you look to see if it makes sense to open a German bakery?' " Steve said. "I reluctantly said yes."

Steve had been a managing director of plant and machinery companies for more than 20 years. Working in the coffee, milling and bakery industries, he was familiar with the manufacturing process and had an appreciation for the importance of using high-quality raw materials. A few months later, the couple traveled to Hawai'i on a reconnaissance mission, scouting bakery locations across O'ahu, Kaua'i and Hawai'i Island. When they came to the Valley Isle, they rented an 'ohana they had found online.

"We ended up in Kula," Steve said. "The owners lived in a bigger house there, and we got to know them. And when they found out what we were looking for, and we found out what they had, all our jaws dropped."

The locals were the proprietors of the Fusion Gourmet Bread Shop, which they had opened in Kīhei in 2016. After much discussion, they suggested that rather than attempting to build a business from the ground up, the Langes take ownership of their bakery.

"There are more than 10,000 (short-term rentals) on Maui. By coincidence, we ended up there. Call it fate, or destiny, or whatever. It was somehow meant to be," Steve said.

The ingredients were all there, an operational kitchen, a popular storefront, a platform to introduce German artisan breads to Maui, but there was one problem. Neither Steve nor Christine were bakers.

When the Langes took ownership of the store in January 2020, their first order of business was to add a German master baker to the team.

Natural Born Bakers

At 2 a.m., while most of Maui slumbers, Michel Heinze is already busy in the kitchen. As Maui Bread Company's master baker in charge of its German Artisan Bread line, he needs the night to assure the bakery is stocked with fresh loaves of spelt, wheat and rye when it opens.

Heinze has been Maui Bread Company's meisterbäcker for almost three years, just







Master German Baker Michel arrives by 2 a.m. to craft favorites like German butter cakes and spelt rolls. Bakers make Hawaiian breads like the lilikoi sweet buns with homemade jelly.

the second person to hold the role full-time since the Langes took ownership. It's a prestigious position, associated with quality and craftsmanship. Certification requires years of apprenticeship, the completion of a rigorous training program, the passing of demanding examinations and the demonstration of a high level of proficiency in a multitude of baking techniques.

Heinze's route to Hawai'i was circuitous. Born in Berlin, he spent years learning his craft at small, traditional bakeries across Hamburg (one had its own windmill for making flour) before working in Spain and Italy. Immediately prior to arriving on Maui, he spent six months in the galley of a small, luxury cruise ship navigating the Southern Ocean off Antarctica.

"My purpose was to learn a traditional craft that would help me to go and see the world, while also making something I love and enjoy to eat myself," Heinze said.

One of the best things about his work at Maui Bread Company is the freedom the Langes afford Heinze regarding what he makes.

"Sharing the recipes of my country is the biggest honor of them all. My favorite product (right now) is our new German butter cake, a very traditional recipe, made with love and lots of butter. It's like a piece of home for me."





Tiffani Nelson joins Heinze in the kitchen around 4 a.m. As the master baker in charge of Maui Bread Company's Hawaiian Artisan Bread line, Nelson gets to sleep in a bit later than Heinze but is no less dedicated to her craft.

Born and raised on Maui, Nelson has worked for the Langes since early 2021. A graduate of the Culinary Arts Program at the University of Hawai'i Maui College, she was fascinated by extravagant pastries from a young age.

"I was a semi-artsy kid and wanted to do something where I still had creative freedom," said Nelson. "I grew up watching Food Network shows like "Cake Boss," "Ace of Cakes," "Cupcake Wars," and was amazed how perfect and beautiful deserts could be."

Nelson's favorite menu item is the distinctly local K-dog.

"It's a half a brown hot dog, half a Portuguese sausage, mozzarella cheese in the middle, wrapped in bread – a nice savory breakfast on the beach," Nelson said. "But they are quite popular so it's best to get them first thing in the morning."

Maui Bread Rising

It's more than K-dogs and the aroma of fresh bread that drives patrons to Maui Bread Company. Many people have discovered the bakery among Yelp's 2023 list of "Top 100 Places to Eat in the U.S." (Only three Hawai'i eateries made the list.) Four out of five people who walk in the door are visiting Maui Bread Company for the first time, according to the Langes.

In addition to the bake shop, about a third of the Maui Bread Company's creations go to commercial clients like food trucks, restaurants, supermarkets and hotels. One day the crew is preparing brioche Pullman loaves for Duke's Beach House, the next day it's hamburger buns for Cool Cat Café. The bakery offers some 70 unique products, including a line of gluten-free breads and seasonal treats.

The Langes have discussed opening additional locations on Maui, perhaps another island. For now, however, the focus is on Kīhei, K-dogs and brötchen.

"It was a journey that was not planned," Steve said. "Especially at our age, when most people are wondering what they can do with their retirement.

"You can have plans for your life but, sometimes, life has plans for you."