

This Baker's Business Is Booming (and It's Not Just Because of the Cannon Fire)

Justin Cherry's breads are in demand this semiquincentennial, as is his knowledge of historical baking methods.

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Reporting from Mount Vernon, Va.

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Like most bakers, Justin Cherry, of Half Crown Bakehouse, based in Charleston, S.C., wakes up in the wee hours to start the process of kneading breads and buns for the customers who line up outside his shop as soon as it opens. But unlike his competitors, Mr. Cherry's bakery is a camp tent housing a clay oven like those used by the bakers for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.

At historic sites from Massachusetts down to Florida, Mr. Cherry turns out loaves similar to those General Washington commissioned for his men. The baker-in-residence at Mount Vernon, he has been especially busy this year as the nation celebrates 250, a prelude to the next five years of celebrations at key Revolutionary War sites. He's already booked for Washington's Crossing in Pennsylvania and Monmouth Battlefield in New Jersey, where re-enactors remember one of the war's longest battles with musket and cannon fire.

"People complain that it takes too long to bake bread at home today," he said earlier this month at Mount Vernon, "so watching me is eye opening."



“My process can be as long as 10 hours from mixing sponge, hauling water, to getting the oven heated then cooled enough for bread, and in between mixing the dough, then mopped out the oven then the baking starts in batches,” Mr. Cherry said. Scott Suchman for The New York Times

From his tent on the 12-acre field in front of Washington’s mansion, Mr. Cherry shares his 10-hour process with customers as he works. Like his counterparts of centuries past, Mr. Cherry has to cope with the vagaries of weather. He has baked in

blistering heat and bitter cold as well as in wind, rain and snowstorms, struggling to secure his tent against gales.

During his busiest times, Mr. Cherry's parents, wife and 11-year-old daughter — all dressed in period clothing — help with sales. They chat with customers about 18th-century baking and history while Mr. Cherry hustles goods into and out of the oven.

In addition to selling one-pound loaves of bread like the rations received by Continental army soldiers during the war, Mr. Cherry provides seasonal offerings, just as his historical counterparts would have done. These include salt pork butter, locally made cheeses, butter and salted fish. His gingerbread, formed with hand-carved, 18th-century reproduction molds, take three days to make.



As baker-in-residence at Mount Vernon, Mr. Cherry sets up shop once a month on Washington's estate, as well as major holidays like the Fourth of July and Washington's Birthday. Scott Suchman for The New York Times

His bakehouse is so named because a one-pound loaf of bread cost a half-crown or 12 1/2 pence in the mid-1700s, the equivalent of \$3.50 today. His loaves cost around \$15, and his goods usually sell out in less than an hour to groups lured to his tent by the smell of baking bread.

Barbara Onorato and her husband, Tony, have followed Mr. Cherry's career since they first read about him in 2018. The owners of a historic Pennsylvania farm, the Onoratos live in nearby Montclair, Va., and are his regular customers at Mount

Vernon and other sites. “His bread and other items are fabulous,” Ms. Onorato said. “And I love that his whole family participates.”

Raised in western Pennsylvania in a family of avid historical interpreters, Mr. Cherry has been wearing period clothing and traveling to Revolutionary War battle re-enactment sites with his parents and brother since he was 8. While working with the chef Sean Brock at Husk in Charleston, S.C., Mr. Cherry realized he could bake bread on the hearth used to cook meats once the fire had died down.



Mr. Cherry is up early to make the bread dough, but he starts the fire for his oven the night before baking. Scott Suchman for The New York Times



“Justin’s knowledge base, and expertise in the 18th century foodways history, makes him a great public education asset,” said Allison Wickens, the vice president of education at Mount Vernon. Scott Suchman for The New York Times

His clay oven was built using an 18th-century design, and he drives it to historic sites on a trailer pulled by his pickup truck. Scott Suchman for The New York Times

“Being so involved with re-enactments which includes campfire cooking my whole life, the next logical step for me was to make my own oven,” Mr. Cherry said. After consulting with the foodways historian David Shields, Mr. Cherry found specifications for building a clay oven in a local archive written by the Salzburgers, a community of Georgia bakers that operated near the Savannah River in the 1740s.

Mr. Cherry bakes with grains ground to order, including at the Mount Vernon gristmill. He also uses barm, or brewer’s yeast, that he obtains from local beer makers just as bakers did before leaveners were mass produced.

“I try to use ingredients that would have been common to the regions where I work because that’s what Washington’s bakers would have had to do,” he said. Collecting 18th-century recipes, bakeware, equipment, manuscripts and books is also part of Mr. Cherry’s process. He has a particular focus on Christopher Ludwick, a German immigrant who opened a successful Philadelphia bakery and confectionery in the 1750s and who served as Washington’s Superintendent of Bakers during the war.



At Mount Vernon, which sees more than a million visitors a year, Mr. Cherry's bread loaves are a popular attraction. Scott Suchman for The New York Times

“Ludwick was managing scores of local bakers in supply depots and other key sites relatively close to the troops for easy transport,” Mr. Cherry said. “They were turning out hundreds, if not thousands, of loaves for the army.”

According to Washington's calculations, it would have taken 100,000 pounds of flour to feed 15,000 men for each year the war went on, and Washington paid for bakers out of his own pocket. He often wrote to Ludwick directly with precise orders for bread deliveries.

“While many of these bakers were drafted into the service of the baking department, some were contract professionals who continued their trade after the war,” Mr. Cherry said.

Cyrus Busthill was among them. A formerly enslaved baker in Pennsylvania, Busthill operated a contract bakery in New Jersey in 1782 while skirmishes were ongoing after the battle of Yorktown. He opened a successful bakery and brewery in Philadelphia after the war and became a founding member of Philadelphia's Free African Society who supported independent Black schools. The opera singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson was one of his descendants.

Cliveden, an 18th century home in the Germantown area of Philadelphia, is a recent addition to Mr. Cherry's roster of sites. Carolyn G. Wallace, its education director, said they had been trying to find ways to work with him for some time.



In 2023, Mr. Cherry was admitted to the Worshipful Company of Bakers of London, a bakers' guild that dates to the 12th century. Scott Suchman for The New York Times

“Getting to actually experience the same tastes that someone from the 18th century, especially an army soldier would have tasted, is an incredible tool for teaching about this era,” Ms. Wallace said.

But it was the sight of his 18th-century tent and scent from the bake oven that lured Cindy Kitchel, an educator from Indianapolis, over to Mr. Cherry’s tent on a bright 21st-century June morning.

“I was in D.C. for a conference,” said Ms. Kitchel, an avid home bread baker who was visiting Mount Vernon for the first time. “Seeing this helps me remember what America250 is really supposed to be about.”

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Corrected on July 1, 2026: An earlier version of this article misstated Carolyn G. Wallace’s title at Cliveden. She is its education director, not its executive director.

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