



## Popular baker finds low volume more to his liking



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Don Guerra is not a vanity license plate kind of guy.

They've just never appealed to him. But when the state began selling a special hunger relief plate - decorated with wheat stalks - that benefits local food banks, he couldn't resist.

"BREAD4U" is what drivers behind the charcoal-gray Honda Odyssey will see. They might also spot - through that back window - the spiked ends of long, burnished baguettes poking out of brown paper bags.

Guerra is a baker. More specifically, a community-supported artisan baker.

And what exactly is that? Well, quite simply, it means the owner of Barrio Bread doesn't have a retail store. You won't find his bread at restaurants, languishing on tables for diners to absentmindedly nibble.

Instead, he sells directly to the public through community-supported agriculture pickup points and spots around town, including the Saturday farmers market at Plaza Palomino. Customers who have signed up for an email list receive a "bread alert" that lets them know what types of loaves are available for \$4-\$6, so they can stake their claim. Otherwise, people take their chances at the farmers market where Guerra's bread typically sells out in under an hour.

"Most bread is sold as pre-order to get it in the hands of people who really want it," says Guerra, 42, who started Barrio Bread in 2009.

He figures he's lost some customers who aren't happy that his bread isn't available all the time. But, "it's not special if it's always available," Guerra says. "You lose the demand."

More than that, you lose the man.

"I'm one dude - I'm not just a bread machine," he says.

While he's quite devoted to his craft - he made between 20,000 and 25,000 loaves of bread last year by himself - he did it while still enjoying quality family time with his wife, Jen, and two young kids. The avid outdoorsman managed to carve out breaks for cycling, running and yoga. He even closed up shop and took a three-week vacation this summer.

Guerra, you see, did the whole big bakery thing years ago, working pretty much 24-7. "I gave myself up," Guerra says.

This second time around, the baking is on his terms.

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"I've always loved bread," says Guerra, whose mother and grandmother baked weekly. He remembers that amazing yeasty smell wafting from the oven and tearing into still-warm loaves. So when he had the opportunity, at age 21, to work at a Flagstaff bakery, it was his dream job. He baked while learning more about different bread-making techniques and studying business. In five years, he had a business plan and opened his own place in Flagstaff called The Village Baker. Next, he opened The Village Baker of Ashland in Oregon.

The high-volume bakery biz wasn't quite what it was cracked up to be.

"I got into business because I wanted to bake bread - I ended up putting out fires," says Guerra. "I was 26, 27 managing all these people and, oh my gosh, I could barely manage myself."

His days were long. He'd catch so little shut-eye at night that he'd end up falling asleep whenever and wherever around the bakery. It got to be a joke with his friends.

Enough was enough, and Guerra sold the business. He and his wife came to Tucson, where Guerra had attended the University of Arizona, to raise their family and teach. Guerra taught math and P.E. and loved it. But he missed baking bread.

The way Guerra figures it, he had no choice.

"This is what I do," he says, gesturing toward his just-big-enough-for-one-person bakery, a flour smudge near his left eyebrow and dried dough flecks on his arms.

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With the help of father-in-law Jon Harvey, an engineer, Guerra converted space at his home into a bakery, which operates under the state's cottage industry food law, so he could bake full time. On this morning, Guerra is multi-tasking, as usual, with bread in various stages.

The imported deck oven spews the scent of tangy sourdough while already-finished loaves - baked to a deep brown, flour-dappled finish - line wire racks.

A large fermentation cabinet holds several towel-lined baskets swaddling blobs of dough.

Guerra methodically upends the baskets onto a flour-dusted wooden table. His hands quickly, gently shape the lumps into loaves. He grabs a razor and slashes each one, the cuts splitting open to reveal holes and specks of stone-ground wheat.

Barrio Bread is made using old, European-style techniques that rely on wild yeast present in the air rather than commercial yeast out of a jar. It's the culinary equivalent of going rogue - you never know what that wild yeast will do.

"The bread is alive," Guerra says. "The bread every day is different. It may not be to the untrained eye. That's what keeps me coming back - you do what it wants. ... Artisan bakers shoot for 70 percent consistency. Even after 20 years, I'll never say I'm an expert."

Guerra makes 40 different types of bread - cranberry walnut, a European-style rye colored with espresso and Kalamata olive are just a few. He doesn't add sugar or oils, which means the bread has a longer shelf life. Because of the long rise time, more protein is broken down, so some people with gluten sensitivities can eat it, too, he says.

People become fanatics for Barrio Bread. Ask Wanda Wong - the retired registered dietitian is hooked.

"It's very nurturing and so nostalgic," she says of the old-world-style bread. Her grandfather was a baker for Southern Pacific Railroad, and she has fond memories of cinnamon buns and crusty dinner rolls. She's been known to throw on an apron when Guerra gets swamped with customers at the farmers market.

After three years, Guerra says demand exceeds supply. And while he accepts help in other areas - neighbors pitch in with deliveries and he has one part-time employee, his friend Ginger Snider who helps with packaging, sales and orders - the one thing he won't relinquish, or even share, is the baking.

"I want to craft the bread," he says, grabbing a wooden peel and moving bread from the steaming oven to the wire racks.

He slides a loaf of cranberry-walnut with a thick, crusty exterior onto the table. Then he drags a serrated knife through the mottled outside that ranges from deep brown to tan. Crumbs fly and steam rises off the cut slices studded with meaty walnut chunks and sweet-tart dried cranberries softened.

Slathered with butter, which is completely unnecessary, the bread is earthy, tangy. Once

you bite through the crisp crust, the inside is airy and light as a fluffy down pillow. This is what it's all about for Guerra - a perfect loaf of bread.

"I'm exactly where I want to be right now," he says. "There's a saying - to know you have enough is to be rich beyond measure. This is really the best of all worlds for me."

### Barrio Bread

Don Guerra's bread is available through Tucson and River Road Gardens Community Supported Agriculture programs as part of both farms' subscription service. He sells from 10-11:30 a.m. Saturday at Plaza Palomino's farmers market, 2970 N. Swan Road, on a first-come, first-served basis.

Go to [www.barriobread.com](http://www.barriobread.com) or check its Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/barrio.bread](http://www.facebook.com/barrio.bread)

### DID YOU KNOW?

Guerra is a big believer in community involvement and is baking test batches of bread using White Sonora soft bread wheat for a project spearheaded by Native Seeds/SEARCH. The grant-funded project aims to revive heritage grains in Southern Arizona. Projects like this, he says, "mean more to me than building an empire."

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