

LET THEM EAT BREAD!

Diet be damned: Complimentary bread is the hottest—and clearly most wallet-friendly—dish on Big Apple tables this winter.

It wasn't too long ago that bread was considered a dieter's nightmare. How times have changed. Today it's the latest culinary preoccupation for New Yorkers and the local chefs serving up new varieties—and moving the baking in-house.

Brian Bistrong, chef and co-owner of Braeburn, started making biscuits when the West Village restaurant opened last October. In his previous cooking jobs, bread was outsourced. "I wanted to put my own touch on the bread," he says. "Besides letting us be creative in a different way, it's more cost-effective for chefs to make bread themselves."

Money matters aside, Jim Lahey, the owner of Sullivan St Bakery says bread is big. "After a few years of a bad rap, the culinary community is looking at bread more seriously," he says. "Chefs are realizing that it's the first thing diners get when they sit down, so it's a chance for to show off."

Jim is giving carbs center stage at his new Chelsea restaurant, Co., which opened this month and serves pizzas, crostinis and other dough-based dinners. Read on for five other spots where you can get your bread fix—on the house. —Shivani Vora



1

NAAN WITH A TWIST

Served at: Pranna, 79 Madison Ave. (between 28th and 29th Sts.); 212-696-5700

Chai Trivedi grew up in Gujarat, India, where he ate the freshly stuffed flatbreads his mother made. At this trendy pan-Asian restaurant, which opened in November and where he serves as executive chef, Chai brings naan to New Yorkers. His take incorporates modern touches and includes at least 15 varieties, so diners like Chelsea Clinton and Giants running back Derrick Ward are practically guaranteed a new interpretation with each visit. Some recent hits include naan stuffed with daikon radish, grated green chili and cilantro and a version filled with soft Indian cheese infused with lime zest. The basic dough is flour, water, eggs, milk and ajowan seeds, which is left to rise for an hour. It's then divided into individual portions, pressed flat, filled and stuck to the wall of the tandoor (a high-heat clay oven). Five to 10 minutes later, the bread is done and served with a coconut dip and chutney.

2

BUTTERY BISCUITS

Served at: Braeburn, 117 Perry St. (at Greenwich St.); 212-255-0696

When Brian Bistrong eloped with his wife, Chieun Ko-Bistrong, 12 years ago at a romantic inn in Old Chatham, N.Y., their post-wedding breakfast included biscuits that he's dreamed about serving to diners ever since. At his hip West Village eatery, Brian finally gets his chance, with these killer bite-size beauties. His batter of scallions sautéed in garlic, fresh thyme, unsalted high-fat butter, eggs, buttermilk, flour, baking powder and lemon zest is formed into minidiscs. The biscuits are then brushed with an egg wash, sprinkled with fleur de sel and baked in a convection oven for 15 minutes. (The secret to their extra-soft texture, Brian says, is not to overmix the dough.) They're served as soon as they're cooked, along with butter. The biscuits are so delicious, you can seldom stop at one—Brian admits he eats two or three a day—so it's just as well each diner gets two on the house.

3

REMARKABLE ROLLS

Served at: Forge, 134 Reade St. (between Greenwich and Hudson Sts.); 212-941-9401

Nothing irritates Marc Forgione more than a restaurant that serves plain-Jane bread. So at his own eatery the precursor to the meal is stellar. The chef and owner of the bolto, which opened in June (and next month will be renamed Marc Forgione), serves potato rolls with a side of caramelized onion butter to diners (including luminaries like basketball pro Steve Nash and actor Colin Hanks). He starts by boiling Yukon gold potatoes and putting them through a food mill until they are like mash. Eggs, butter, flour and yeast are added and the dough is left to rise before the rolls are baked for 10 minutes. The tennis ball-size rolls are made ahead of time and reheated in an amique oven in the dining room, then brushed with Plugra butter and topped with fleur de sel just before serving. The accompanying spread is a blend of butter, caramelized onions, shallots, parsley and chives—and adds a touch of sweetness.

4

THE PERFECT PRETZEL

Served at: Commerce, 50 Commerce St. (between Bedford and Barrow Sts.); 212-524-8301

This hip restaurant excels at jazzing up classic American favorites, so it's fitting that the mini pretzels, which debuted in February when the place opened, are such a hit. They're served as part of a basket filled with seven kinds of breads, but these salty little goodies are the star. Executive chef and owner Harold Moore makes them with yeast, King Arthur bread flour and Plugra butter. The mixture is formed into a large ball, left to rise for an hour, parceled out into 1-ounce pieces and set aside to rise for another 15 minutes before being shaped. Then the entire kitchen staff pitches in to roll and twist the dough into 400 perfect pretzels, the likes of which have been enjoyed by actors Josh Lucas and Susan Sarandon. The lot is poached for 30 seconds, topped with French sea salt and baked on a pizza stone for a pretzel that's crispy on the outside and has a pleasingly chewy texture on the inside.

5

CHEESY POPOVERS

Served at: BLT Steak, 106 E. 57th St. (between Park and Lexington Aves.); 212-752-7470

As the name suggests, the menu at this always-packed eatery emphasizes red meat, but legions of fans (including boldfaced Lisa Kudrow and Bill Clinton) come here for the Gruyère cheese popovers as well. Milena Molina, the pastry chef for all BLT eateries, and her staff start baking the hot treats at 10:30 a.m. each morning. Lukewarm whole milk, eggs, salt and flour are blended into a smooth paste, and once the mixture rests for three minutes to remove any air bubbles, it's poured into already hot pans, topped with Gruyère cheese and baked for nearly an hour. (It sounds simple, but making popovers successfully is an art form—if there are any air bubbles in the batter, they won't bake, and if the milk is too hot or too cold, they won't pop.) About 500 are made throughout the day, so diners always get them fresh from the oven served with decadent 50 percent-fat unsalted butter. In case you're ambitious enough to try making these popovers at home, each basket comes with a recipe card.