

SEPTEMBER 21, 2014

# LIFE & TIMES

NEWSUNDAYTIMES



## The sweetest treat

Ezekiel Ananthan  
forged his own  
path to becoming a  
successful baker  
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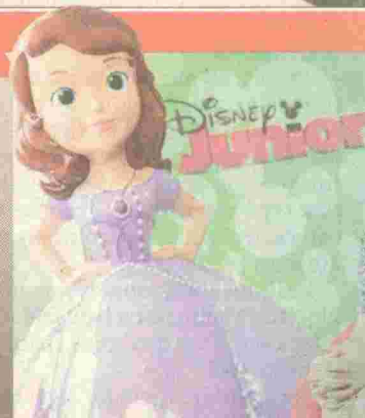
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LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

# A taste for baking

Having put his fingers in various pies, Ezekiel Ananthan has finally found his calling in a baker's world, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**M**ANY successful adults today have usually chosen one of two career paths: either they work in their parents' business or they pursue a vocation that is entirely different. Ezekiel Ananthan or also known as Ananth, author of the newly published cookbook, *Home-baked Breads*, however, chose a path that was somewhere in between.

This 31-year-old baker, who's a native of Kampung Kayu Ara, Selangor, grew up helping his parents in their catering business. "One time, we were catering for four to five days straight. It was a church convention and there were about 600 people there. We made food for breakfast, tea, lunch and dinner for all of them. My parents and I slept only for a few hours. It was like the festive seasons — our relatives all helped. My job wasn't always to cook, sometimes to pack food or load the lorry."

Ananth adds: "My father always looked at his work as 'serving people'. It may have only cost RM2.50 per person, but that RM2.50 is what raised our family. He treats it like serving a guest in our house. The food has to be good quality. He always said that you can cheat people for one day. But if you want customers to come to you, there's lots of competition and you need to provide good quality food."

#### GETTING THERE

Once he finished basic schooling, Ananth ditched his computer science course within a year of joining the college. "I couldn't imagine sitting in front of a computer for the rest of my life. I wanted to travel. To anywhere, actually."

Ananth then joined a hotel management course in Kolej Damansara Utama. "That's where I first learnt about baking. When I finished, I went to work as a waiter in the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Singapore for 2½ years. The exposure was very good. Do you know, in their baking department, they have a whole room just for chocolate and ice-cream?"

Later, he was offered a job as a chef in a food production company in Wellington, New Zealand. He describes the job in the following manner: "In a restaurant, you will have the kitchen and the dining



Ananth, wife Sherina and son Marcus.

room. In a food production company, you still have the kitchen, but you take out the chairs and table in the dining room. All you are doing is producing food and sending it elsewhere to places like supermarkets. The kind of food we supplied was like roti canai, butter chicken and biryani. These are ready-to-eat meals. And we supplied them to the rugby stadium. There is a lot of interest in Malaysian food. In Wellington alone, there are over 25 Malaysian restaurants."

He was barely six months into the job when the management of the company changed and he knew he would be out of a job soon. "Luckily, there was a bakery nearby and the owner, Patrick, offered me an apprenticeship. There were three of us — Kevin started at midnight, I started at 2am and Patrick came in at 4am."

He regards both men as his "teachers" with very different teaching styles. "I was three to four days into the job when Patrick gave me two sheets of paper and two recipes. He said to mix the two and come up with something. Both of us knew something was wrong, but he wouldn't tell me what. I had to figure it out for myself. I used to do research in the national library, which was opposite the bakery. That's when I learnt that maybe I was overstretching the pastry or it was too thick or thin. With Kevin, however, it was different. He always said, 'Let your equipment do the job. Don't force it.'"

A very important lesson Ananth



learnt about baking was that you must always follow the recipe. Here's what happened when he deviated from the recipe for chocolate chip muffins. "I thought I would add double the amount of chocolate chips. I mean, more chocolate would be better, yes? When the muffins came

out of the oven, they looked like pork chops and were falling apart."

#### MORE THAN JUST INGREDIENTS

Is it difficult, then, for the average Malaysian to bake bread? Well, Ananth says that you can't just make bread. You need to know what kind

of bread you'd like to make.

"Think of curry. You can't just make curry. You need to know what kind of curry you want to make. Is it chicken curry? Is it vegetable curry? Then there are different ingredients for different curries and different cooking methods. In the same way, once you figure out which kind of bread you want to make, there are different ingredients to use, even the kind of yeast. There are different methods of preparation like different times for leaving the dough to sit. Some types of bread are done in five hours; some need overnight fermentation."

A tip he shares is that you need to be attentive to your surroundings at all times. Flour is a natural ingredient and it may affect the kind of bread you create. For example, if it's a rainy day, the bread will rise slower.

There are two ways to approach making bread. One is what he calls "grandmother's philosophy" which is "one cup of this and one cup of that".

The problem is that your grandmother and you may use different cups. Then there's the one about "thinking it through". This was precisely what happened recently ago when a student (at his bakery in Mayang Plaza, Petaling Jaya) said she had followed the recipe and the dough was still not right. When we went through what she had done, we realised that instead of putting 20g of sugar, she had put in 200g."

#### Home-baked Breads

By: Ezekiel Ananthan  
Published by: MPH Group Publishing  
Price: RM39.90

**TOMATO CHEESE FOCACCIA**  
Makes 1

**INGREDIENTS**  
500g bread flour  
10g salt  
10g instant dried yeast  
250ml water  
10ml olive oil  
10g dried oregano  
**Topping**  
10-15 cherry tomatoes  
10ml olive oil  
20g parmesan cheese  
20g rocket leaves (arugula)

**METHOD**  
Using a mixer with a dough hook, mix the flour, salt, yeast, water and olive oil on low speed for 3 minutes. Increase the speed to medium and continue to mix for 10 minutes. Add the dried oregano and mix for an additional 2 minutes.

Transfer the dough to a lightly floured container and allow to rest for 40 minutes until the dough doubles in size. Transfer the dough onto a clean surface. Punch the dough lightly and roll it flat with a rolling pin. Allow the dough to rest for 10 minutes. Using your finger, dimple the dough. Then place the tomatoes onto the dough, and sprinkle with



olive oil. Let the dough proof in a warm place for 40-50 minutes. Bake in a preheated oven (180°C)

for 35 minutes until the bottom is done. Top with parmesan cheese and rocket leaves.

**BASIL AND ROCK SALT CIABATTA**

**INGREDIENTS**  
**BIGA STARTER**  
150g bread flour  
10g wholemeal flour  
10g rye flour  
½ tsp instant dried yeast  
100ml water

**FINAL DOUGH**  
150g bread flour  
5g yeast  
5g salt  
200g water  
All of the biga starter  
50g fresh basil, chopped  
80ml olive oil  
10g rock salt

**METHOD**  
To prepare the starter, mix all the ingredients in a mixing bowl until a dough is formed. Knead the dough for 3 minutes. Cover the mixture with cling wrap and let it cool in a chiller for 12 hours, or overnight. Note that this is a firm dough.

**To make the ciabatta,** Use a mixer with a paddle, mix the biga starter together with the bread flour, yeast, salt and water for 2 minutes at low speed. Next, increase to medium speed for 10 minutes. This is a very wet dough, and has a smooth shine.

Transfer the dough into an oiled container. Cover the container and let it rise for 25 minutes. Make sure the container is large enough for the dough to rise to double its size. Then, transfer the dough onto a clean surface and gently fold the dough using the stretch-and-fold method. Rest the dough for 25 minutes. Repeat the stretch-and-fold method and allow to rest for a further 25 minutes. Then, stretch and fold a third time and allow to rest for an hour. The dough

will have firmed up enough through this process. Transfer the dough onto a well-floured surface. Using a metal scraper, cut the dough into rectangular, 200-250g portions and place them onto a baking tray. Avoid over handling the dough as this will result in loss of air and gas bubbles. Dimple the dough with olive oil, basil and rock salt. Allow the dough to proof for 40 minutes and bake in a preheated oven (180°C) for 35 minutes.



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