

Une Femme D’AFFAIRES*

*Business Woman

Photos by Philippe Santamaria - Interview by Alice White Walker

In business for nearly 90 years, Poilâne *boulangerie* is a Parisian institution dedicated to baking craftsmanship, now with Apollonia Poilâne at the helm. We sat down with her to talk about learning the ropes, defining boundaries and how bread and culture collide.

You took the reins of Poilâne at age 18, following the tragic death of your parents. How did you find the energy and courage to begin this weighty task, especially from your dorm room at Harvard?

When my parents died, it was obvious to me that I would take over the family business. I always knew I would work at the bakery, but I certainly didn’t think so soon. I held onto a sense of purpose, and

the project (now projects) gave me the strength to take the lead at Poilâne.

What are your earliest memories of the *boulangerie*?

I remember walking the line in front of the store with a basket full of our *sablé* biscuits. These pure butter shortbread cookies are called *Punitions*®



Apollonia Poilâne

(“punishments”) — the wait for them is meant to punish our clients’ patience!

Learning a new skill is no small feat. Can you explain how you prepared? Who was instrumental in bringing you up to speed in the art of bread baking?

Baking is a sensory experience. Like every baker at Poilâne, I had an apprenticeship with one of the master bakers who still heads our team today. Our methods use ancient techniques but are completely our own and have been passed down. We don’t use thermometers or sophisticated tools; we rely on the skill of the human body and brain. It’s this methodology that I’ve tried to convey in *Poilâne: The Secrets of the World-Famous Bread Bakery* — our latest cookbook for home bakers.

How have you been able to maintain the feel of a small artisanal bakery despite being such a widely known name?

Poilâne is, above all, a neighborhood bakery; its large following was built through innovation and intention, not expansion.



Both the façade and the interior of the original location are as warm as they are inviting.

Your grandfather opened Poilâne in 1932, opting to make sourdough loaves rather than traditional French baguettes. How much does this initial business decision reflect the company's current standing as a Parisian *boulangerie*?

It set us apart at first and has cultivated our singularity since. I'm proud to be an independent bakery; Poilâne stands for a culture of bread beyond its goods. We bake the type of bread that generations of French people ate before the baguette was invented (Editor's note: around a hundred years ago). Now, almost nine decades since we began, it's safe to say that we were onto something, as more and more artisanal bakeries have begun making country-style loaves. We don't chase fads or trends.

How is Poilâne different from other French bakeries? Where did your grandfather draw inspiration when he started the bakery?

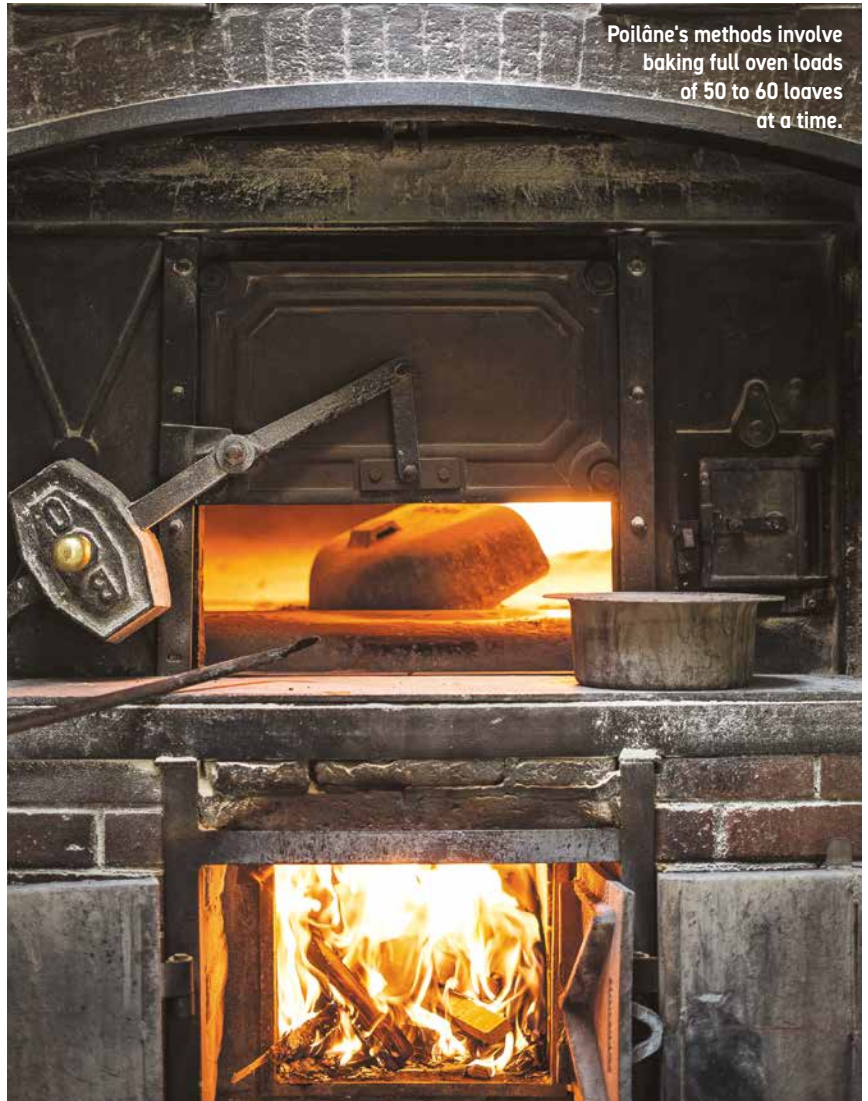
For one, we are 100% independent and third-generation family-owned. My grandfather opened his first store, founded a community and started feeding its spirit. Now, we have four bakeries in Paris and one in London, with an ambition of broadening our circle of Parisian stores.

We have multiple locations, but no two look alike. Our bakers make each loaf by hand and are responsible for it from start to finish. There are no buttons to push or dials to read. Most modern bakeries resemble a laboratory, where the baker is an appendage of a machine. Our process is simple and handmade: it starts

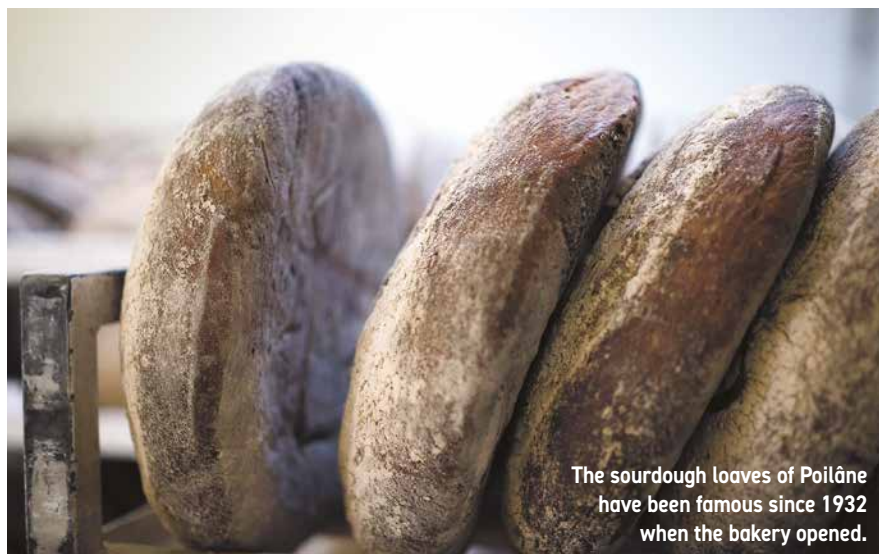
with the grains, which are stone-ground into flours, fermented, formed by hand and then baked in wood-fired ovens. My grandfather knew this was the best way to bake bread and to give humanistic value to the craft.

Did growing up with the bakery help you in its management? What are some obstacles you experienced?

I was brought up, not only as part of the baking process, but also as part of the business its culture. I was fortunate to inherit the team that my father built, so I started in a great place. That's not to say I didn't have obstacles... For one, to bake the way we do, we can't make a few loaves at a time, we have to have a full oven load of 50 to 60 — the loaves interact with



Poilâne's methods involve baking full oven loads of 50 to 60 loaves at a time.



each other, and the ovens need to be kept continuously fired. The first months were laborious, but perseverance and the public's reception of our products did the rest.

Did you have to test new recipes, or do you tend to stick with the traditional recipes that have been passed down through your family?

Bread baking has been around for millennia, but it is how we bake that makes our products unique. My father's concept of tradition involved retro-innovation: the idea that sometimes to find something new, you need to rediscover the past. Some recipes, like our signature wheat sourdough bread, have been perfected over time, while more recent ones, like our cornbread, have been updated to contain no naturally occurring gluten. Often you will find a laundry list of ingredients that replace gluten in bread, but my goal was to keep the ingredients as few and simple as possible. We started working on this recipe in 2006 and began selling it 10 years later. It too will mature in time.

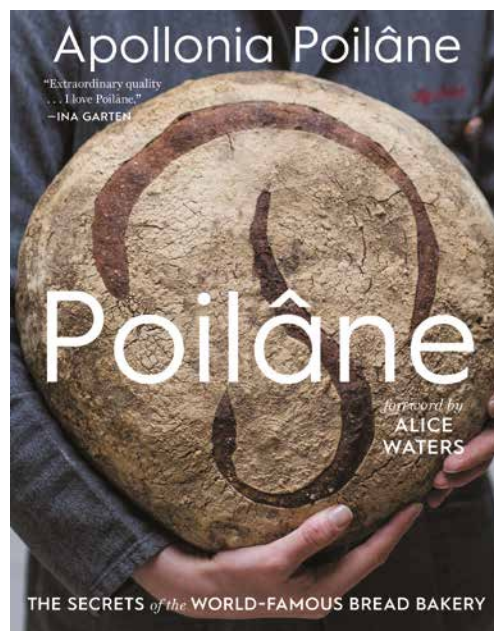
What do people most misunderstand about the business side of a *boulangerie*?

A *boulangerie* has always played a central role in human civilization; without bread (and someone to bake it), you can't be fueled to hunt, or collect or plant

grains or build settlements that will one day turn into villages and cities. In France, the *boulangerie* is a cornerstone of local culture. It begs the question of the care and value both the bakers and the patrons put in.

Have you faced any presumptions or challenges as a female head in a predominantly male domain?

Luckily, having been trained as an apprentice baker and having spent most of my childhood working in the business for pocket money, I had already earned the respect of my team. I was sheltered because



of this, to a certain extent, but I certainly have been challenged, which doesn't bother me as much as it reflects my counterparts' states of mind!

Tradition is the cornerstone of any family business. What else do you need for authentic and healthy longevity?

I think you also need the opposite: modernity. Tradition is not static but a continuous process. We chose a motto a couple of years ago to reflect our spirit: *contemporain par tradition* ("contemporary by tradition").

Your father used social connections to create intrigue around the business. Have you done the same?

My father was wonderful at illustrating the significance of bread in culture. For him, it was pure joy and curiosity to explore what bread meant to society, and I think people were enchanted by him.

For me, I keep an open mind and nurture this social connection as well. I've also been fortunate to collaborate with great imaginative minds; we regularly take on projects with galleries and museums. Sir Paul Smith recently filmed in our bakery, inventing his own signature loaves. I created a cotton bread envelope with the fantastic designer, L/Uniform. I nurture relationships with artists, focus on developing new connections and always feel grateful for the encounters bread fosters. 🍞

www.poilane.com

Poilâne:
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the World-Famous
Bread Bakery*

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