

LEGEND AT THE WHARF

A one-of-a-kind complex for snacking, dining, shopping, and discovering — by Kimberly Olson



..... LONG BEFORE BOUDIN AT THE WHARF COMES INTO VIEW, THE HEADY AROMA OF FRESHLY BAKED SOURDOUGH BREAD WAFTS YOUR WAY, INSPIRING DAYDREAMS OF A THICK, CRUSTY LOAF. IF SAN FRANCISCO HAS A SIGNATURE SCENT, THIS IS IT, AND TRYING TO RESIST ITS THRALL IS A LOSING GAME.

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As you approach Boudin (pronounced “bo-DEEN”), 30-foot windows facing the sidewalk reveal bread-makers expertly shaping dough into rounds, loaves, and baguettes—even alligators and turtles.

Using sights and smells to tempt passersby was all part of the plan when Boudin Bakery envisioned its 26,000-square-foot flagship building, situated in the heart of Fisherman's Wharf. “I wanted it to be a place to delight the senses in every regard, inspiring curiosity about the bread,” says Sharon Duvall, cochair of Boudin Bakery and Boudin at the Wharf.

Boudin's bread-making process hasn't changed since 1849, when the company began making bread by setting aside a portion of the previous day's dough—called the “mother dough”—created with leavening bacteria that grow only in San Francisco and thrive on the coastal fog. Today, Boudin dough is still cloned from that original batch of mother dough,

which gives the world-famous bread its distinctive, tangy flavor.

The mother dough has a history of its own: “During the 1906 earthquake, Louise Boudin grabbed a wooden bucket and dashed into the burning bakery to save the mother dough—and the business,” says Terry Hamburg, docent of the Boudin Museum & Bakery Tour. “Today, we keep the mother dough in a vault, like a wild beast.” (When the building opened, the mother dough arrived in a Brink's security truck, complete with a police escort.)

Duvall and her partner, Lou Girardo, wanted the flagship building to reflect Boudin's unique history while providing a modern setting that would be a welcome respite for visitors. They enlisted Tom Ancona, who has a background in museum design, to help develop the initial concept, and then hired architecture firm EHDD to bring that vision to life.

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“We wanted the building to have a timeless quality and fit into the waterfront,” says Duncan Ballash, design principal of EHDD. Aiming to mimic the surrounding buildings and piers, Ballash’s team made the structure modern and airy, with a decidedly industrial aesthetic: warehouse-style windows, corrugated cement panels, and hand-troweled stucco, not to mention a giant silo that holds 60,000 pounds of flour. The warm light that fills the building was orchestrated by Auerbach Glasow, which used environmentally friendly lighting that meets California’s strictest Title 24 green standards.

Step inside, and you find yourself in bustling Bakers Mall and Market, where a concierge can answer questions about Boudin and the wharf. The lofty, light-filled alley bisects Boudin at the Wharf—with a gourmet marketplace and bread store on one side and the bakery on the other—to break up the building’s scale. Overhead, wire baskets full of piping-hot loaves travel along a suspended rail system from the bakery to the

store, while visitors traverse a suspended catwalk on their way to the bistro upstairs. “I wanted the interior to have a sense of activity and vitality,” Ballash says. “The public spaces flow from one to the other, pulling you through the building. And as people move through the space and across the bridges, they can see things from different angles.”

Upstairs is Bistro Boudin, the company’s first-ever full-service restaurant, whose interior architecture was conceived by Engstrom Design Group. The upstairs room’s soaring ceiling and exposed supports provide plenty of industrial character, while rich walnut accents warm the space up. Tucked behind the bistro is a cozy, private dining room—complete with a fireplace—that was named after founder Isidore Boudin. The second floor, like the first, has oversize windows so customers can watch crabs being sold, ferries coming and going, and streetcars clinking by.

The museum, also on the second floor, is the result of a collaboration between Boudin historian Diane Alsterlind and Pentagram Design. The space offers a top-down view of the bakery through a glass partition, where visitors can watch 350-pound blobs of dough being lifted and tilted from the mezzanine to the ground floor. As you leave the museum and move onto the walkway back to the tasting room, that glass wall disappears, and you’re completely open to the sounds, sights, and smells of the bakery.

Duvall hopes the multisensory adventure that is Boudin at the Wharf will entice visitors to stay a while. “One of my personal goals was to provide a place of relaxation in Fisherman’s Wharf,” she says. “It’s so painful to people perched on garbage cans and mileage posts to find a place to rest. Even if today isn’t the day they’re going to be buying a loaf of bread, they still deserve some comfort.”