

H E C H O A M I A N O

(adj.) = “hand-made”
or “handcrafted”

Always on the lookout for adventure, Joan & Paul wanted to find out more about the growing artisanal food scene in Baja California Sur. Muy delicioso!

-by Joan Tucker & Paul Papanek | photos by Paul Papanek-

It's been said that a food artisan is someone who is completely and wholly integrated in the creation of their product - made by hand on a small scale, and with a respect for traditional methods and a regard for the local environment. We set out to find some of the people in Southern Baja who were doing just that.

Landing at San José Airport, we got into the best off-road vehicle at our disposal – a rental car – and hit the road.

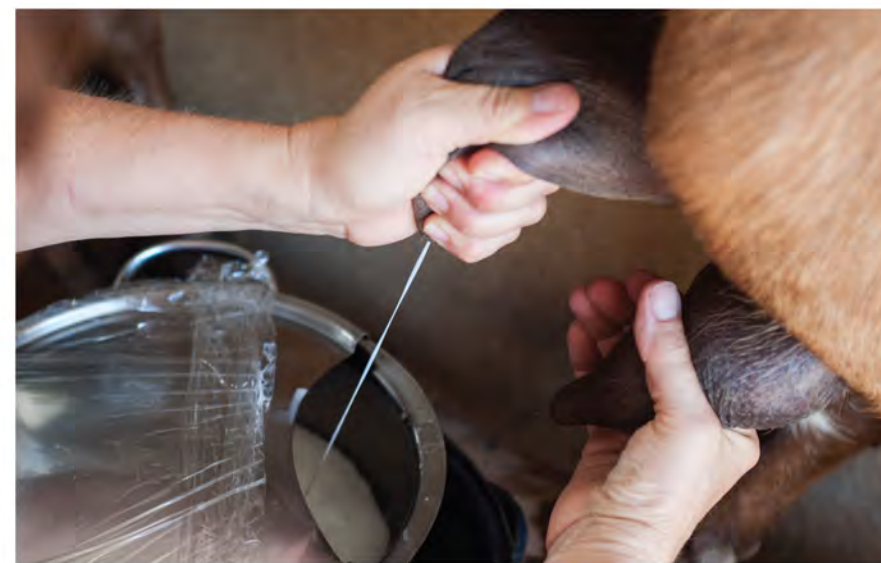
First stop: Seth Pasternack and Punta Espiritu Panaderia Artisanal. Following his sketchy, hand-drawn map, we arrived at the end of a bumpy, single-track road on a bluff called Punta Espiritu - overlooking the arroyo in San José, where Seth's bakery clings to the edge. We were greeted by Seth and his dogs, who all escorted us down a path to the bakery. The dogs waited patiently outside. A soft-spoken man, he farmed organically in

Canada, ran an organic company in Santa Cruz, California that was at the forefront of the movement, and owned his own catering company. He moved to San José del Cabo in 2006 to work with the organic café Sabor de Amor. This is where his passion for baking flourished and became more focused, and three years later, Punta Espiritu Panaderia Artisanal was born.

Baking in a commercial oven, a pizza oven, an old Wedgwood stove, and an outdoor, wood-fired adobe oven, Seth turns out small batches of sourdough whole wheat

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | At Punta Espiritu Panaderia Artisanal, Seth Pasternack uses local ingredients to produce tantalizing baked confections, from vegan fennel chocolate chip cookies to dinner rolls with garlic cloves. His equipment includes a pizza oven, an old Wedgestone stove and an outdoor, wood-fired adobe oven. Lisa and Travis Whitt milk goats and produce a range of cheeses at Whitts' End Rancho, near the Sea of Cortez.

bread, vegan multi-seed cookies, zucchini breads, and dinner rolls oozing with fresh roasted garlic cloves and queso fresco – one of the most popular items at the San José Farmer's Market. Seth's commitment to using the best local ingredients is evident in everything that he bakes – proven by the long lines of people at his booth at the market every Saturday.

A few hours later, and after happily eating more than our fair share of his vegan fennel chocolate chip cookies and a couple of slices of his zucchini bread crusted with black sesame seeds, we left Seth armed with a loaf of his delicious sourdough bread. We realized right away that what we really needed now was some fresh goat cheese. Consulting yet another hard to decipher map, we headed north, made the turn to Cabo Pulmo, and over an hour later, in the absolute middle of

nowhere, turned up the driveway into a goat farm aptly named Whitt's End Rancho.

We were greeted warmly at the house by Lisa and Travis Whitt, formerly of San Diego. In a previous life, Lisa had been a legal assistant, and Travis had his own construction grading company. As a weekend project, they bought a 53-acre ranch in San Diego County and started a large vegetable garden. The yield was so high that they decided to get an animal to feed the vegetables to. That was a goat. One animal led to another and then more, and by the time they sold the ranch to move to Baja, they had taught themselves goat farming, cheese making, and animal husbandry. It was, it turns out, their Baja training camp. Now, with 20 goats on 10 acres overlooking the Sea of Cortez, the Whitts are in the goat cheese business full time. Every day,

Lisa and Travis, aided by a rotating group of helpers from WWOOF – Worldwide Opportunities for Organic Farms – tend to the goats who, depending on whether they're milking or not, either free-range graze or are fed a specialized natural grain feed. The first milking of the day begins at 7:00am. The goats are led to the milking station and up onto one of Travis's hand-built milking platforms – spotlessly maintained by Lisa to the highest standards of hygiene. After Lisa completes the milking, the milk is immediately cooled in preparation to be made into whatever cheese is on the schedule for the day. The traditional chevre that they produce is wonderful - creamy, rich, and tangy. In addition to plain, their varieties

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include Sun-dried tomato with garlic and basil, one with Chipotle, and our personal favorite - Cracked pepper and lemon zest. Lisa has also added ricotta, mozzarella, and big wheels of robust white cheddar to their repertoire. They also have a growing customer base for their raw goat's milk.

With all of this hard work and devotion – not only to their product but to their animals and rancho as well – Travis and Lisa have discovered a profound sense of peace and calm in their lives. The quality of their hand-made cheeses are proof of that.

As we drove away, Travis gave us his mantra with a smile: “Easy living the hard way.”

With our little cooler filled with goat cheese, it occurred to us that what we really needed now was salumi to go along with the bread and cheese. Next stop: Todos Santos and Angelo Dal Bon, third-generation Italian

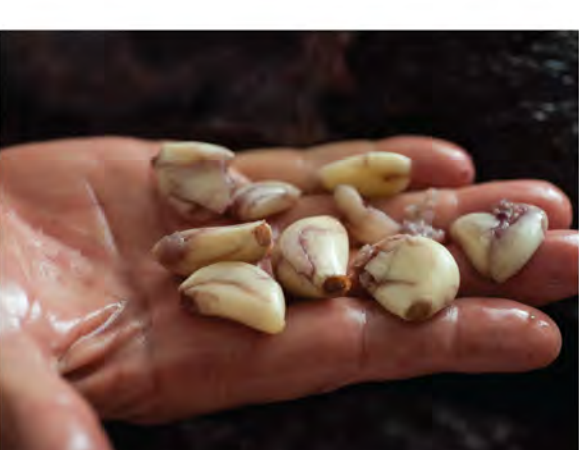
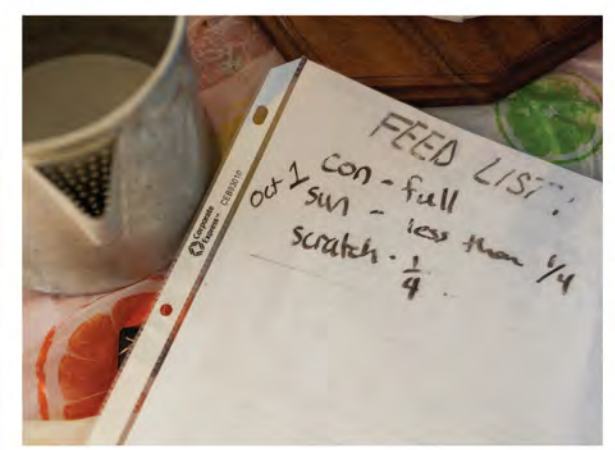
salumi maker – considered to be not only the best in Baja, but respected worldwide.

Angelo and his partner, Magda Valpiani, came to Todos Santos six years ago after an earthquake leveled their restaurant in Lake Garda, Italy. We met them at their restaurant – Tre Galline – and as we accepted the espressos that Magda had made for us, Angelo set about getting ready to make his famous and much sought-after *brasaola* – beef shank that had been marinating in red wine, garlic, rosemary, sea salt, and fresh pink peppercorns from Valle de Guadalupe – the wine region in northern Baja. We watched as he expertly trimmed the marinated beef and then gently placed it in a sheet of dried casing that he had just brought back from Italy. He then proceeded to deftly truss this beautiful piece of beef with a series of complicated lacings and knots in the centuries-old Italian tradition that he learned

from his grandfather. All the while, he was sipping his espresso, planning the evening's dinner service, and entertaining us with stories of his boyhood in Italy – growing up and working in the family restaurant from age eight. With the grace of a dancer and the skill of a surgeon, he never slowed down or missed a beat. By the end of the morning, he had half a dozen finished *brasaolas* hanging on a bamboo pole - starting the drying process that takes anywhere from one to three months. He dries his meats in a palapa on the beach in Todos Santos (the exact location is a closely guarded secret) where the winter temperature and cool salty breezes off the ocean provide the perfect environment for curing. In addition to the sweet and aromatic *brasaola* – which he serves in the

(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE) | The variety and flavor of the cheeses at Whitt's End Rancho is diverse and mouth-watering. The goats at the rancho either free-range graze or eat specialized grain feed, depending on milking schedules. At Tre Galline, Angelo Dal Bon makes *brasaola* with a variety of ingredients, including sea salt and fresh pink peppercorns. He also makes salumi.

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | Angelo Dal Bon and his partner, Magda Valpiani, produce a variety of pastas at Tre Galline, in Todos Santos. Chef Dany Lamot, of Hotel California and Santo Vino produces organic seasoned sea salts, available for purchase. Queso fresco is available from a roadside seller near the intersection of Hwy 19 and Hwy 1. Les Carmona owns and operates Pan de Les, a bakery in La Paz.

restaurant with a little olive oil, pepper, and a drizzle of lemon juice - he also makes salumi, pancetta, lardon and spec. And as if that weren't enough, he and Magda also make the evening's pasta - rigatoni, spaghetti and sheets of lasagna - using a pasta machine with brass attachments that have been in his family for generations. He and Magda have a well-rehearsed choreography that keeps them both busy and laughing the entire time. They have brought Italian family traditions to Todos Santos where they've successfully adapted them to local ingredients. It's a challenge that they greet with enthusiasm every day. As we were getting ready to pull away, Angelo said that we had forgotten something. He ran back into the restaurant, and as I took a mental inventory of all of my camera and lighting equipment, he

reappeared a few moments later with a bag of his fresh rigatoni - the perfect vehicle for the Whitt's goat cheese! *Fantastico!* No trip to Todos Santos would be complete without a stop at the famous Hotel California, where our good friend, Chef Dany Lamot, not only presides over the kitchen and their new restaurant, Santo Vino, but also finds the time to produce wonderful seasoned salts for purchase. Five years ago, he needed to find a source for organic sea salt for the restaurant, and he found it at a 100 year-old salt works that's a torturous 3-hour drive from La Paz on the Sea of Cortez. Since he had always made his own spice and herb mixes for the restaurant, he decided to combine them with the salt and now produces four varieties - Green, with cilantro, parsley and rosemary, Red, with a variety of locally grown Mexican

chilies, Yellow, with curry, ginger, cumin and star anise, and White, which is all-natural. All of these compliment his delicious regional cuisine that he serves at his restaurants. Heading north to La Paz to see Les Carmona at his bakery, Pan de Les, we did a sudden U-turn to buy queso fresco from a guy in a red pickup truck on the side of the road that had a big sign stretched across the tailgate that simply said "Queso." "Who made this?" we asked. "Mi esposa" he replied. "Where?" "Alla," he said as he pointed into the endless desert. "Gracias" and we were on our way. After a night out with friends, we arrived at the bakery bleary-eyed the following

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morning at 4:00am to find Les - who had gotten there at two as he does every day - already deep into the day's production. The baking racks were being filled with unbaked baguettes, pan rusticos, bars, cookies, and sweet rolls, and the soundtrack was the constant beeping of multiple timers signaling when to put something into the oven, take something out, or divide unformed dough into more loaves.

In the mid-'80s, Les's father sent him to the American Institute of Baking in Kansas so he could learn enough to come back and help him bake bread in his restaurant in Huntington Beach. One day, a man walked into the restaurant and asked if they needed a pastry chef. They didn't, but they asked him to show them what he could do. For Les, the chef's creations were revelatory: in four hours, the man had made an incredible spread of cakes, petit fours, and cookies. At that very moment, Les told himself, "I want to be that magician."

After years of honing his craft as a pastry chef and baker in hotels and restaurants from Chicago to Santa Barbara to San Francisco and Sonoma, Les felt a need to put his heart back into his work. That led him and his wife, Diane, on a trip down the Baja peninsula to La Paz, which reminded them of Santa Barbara 30 years ago. They made the move, and Les opened his bakery in 2007. Pan de Les - the only artisan bread store and bakery in La Paz - specializes in crusty artisan, small-production breads and delicious pastries, all made by Les. His goal is to always keep it small so that his hand is evident in everything he does.

Les's philosophy of baking is simple - make the best product in the most traditional way using the best local ingredients, and educate the public about what great bread can be.

Leaving Les's retail bakery with a *pan rustico* in hand, we walked across the street to one of our favorite food stores in Baja

- Sabores de Mexico - owned by Chiara Abente and her husband, Juan Pablo Caso. With each other's encouragement, they have created Don Pablo Gourmet - a line of hand-made, all natural marmalades and flavored sea salts. Much of the shelf space in the store is taken up with jars of Chiara's now-famous marmalades - Jamaica with chia, Tomato, Onion, Red Pepper, Jalapeño, and Mango/Chipotle (the perfect accompaniment for our pan rustico) - and her Tamarind/Chipotle salsa. More of the shelf space is occupied by Juan Pablo's organic seasoned sea salts that he blends in a room behind the store. The day we visited, he and his helper were making and jarring Curry, Sesame Seed, Italian Blend, Provençal, Chipotle and Merlot salts. "That one is particularly great on steak," says Juan Pablo. Opening a door in the back room, Juan Pablo laughed as he

(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE) | Trained at the American Institute of Baking, and working in restaurants in Chicago, Santa Barbara, and other locations, Les Carmona works his baking magic at Pan de Les to produce fabulous baked goods with traditional methods and local ingredients. At Sabores de Mexico, Juan Pablo Caso makes a range of seasoned sea salts.

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showed us five tons of salt from a salt works in Los Planes waiting to be blended with his mixtures of herbs and spices.

Chiara, who has been interested in cooking since she was a young girl, studied culinary arts at the Art Institute of San Diego. Her first venture in La Paz was a company called Sunny Dried Fruits, which she started in 1997 as a way to ensure that her young son had healthy snacks. She started making the marmalades for fun – the jalapeño being the first, soon followed by red pepper. Her husband encouraged her to expand, and she soon took over her mother's large kitchen where she and her four helpers still make the marmalades every day. She uses locally sourced organic fruits and vegetables, organic Mexican sugar, organic vanilla from a farm near Veracruz, and organic jamaica from Oaxaca. For a small batch producer, Chiara is a charismatic and dynamic woman who thinks big. She

recently signed contracts with 18 Mega's, Walmart, Aramburro, and City Club, but has convinced them that if they want to sell her products, it will have to be on her terms. She produces in limited quantities, and her flavors are seasonal. They all agreed.

Like Les Carmona, it's important to her to educate the locals about the advantages of eating natural foods with no preservatives or other artificial ingredients.

Leaving Chiara and Juan Pablo, we drove across town to the spotless kitchen of Manuela Matthiesen, better known to locals as the Sausage Lady. Manuela, a certified butcher from Munich, Germany, arrived in La Paz with her husband Alex in 2001. They brought with them an enormous meat grinder and the tools of her trade and immediately set about doing what she does best: bratwurst, knackwurst, Italian sausage, wieners, the best black forest ham we've ever tasted, sauerkraut, and killer traditional

German cherry and chocolate cakes. Holding true to traditional recipes, Manuela sources her ingredients from the best local butchers, and with the help of her daughter and husband, produces the only authentic German artisan meats in Baja. She's a colorful addition to the local community and a fixture at the La Paz Farmers Market twice a week. And – her sausages are incredible.

"More bread!" we said as we added Manuela's black forest ham to our cooler. We headed south out of La Paz and drove 35km to the town of El Triunfo for a visit to Mark Spahr at Caffe El Triunfo. Mark is the artisanal bread baking pioneer in southern Baja, having baked every day for the last 20 years. He began the local bread revolution at his recently sold Caffé Todos Santos and continues the tradition of using wild yeast

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(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) Chiara Abente, co-owner of Sabores de Mexico, offers a line of all-natural, handmade marmalades with locally-sourced ingredients. Manuela Matthiesen (aka, "The Sausage Lady") also uses locally-sourced ingredients to bring delicious German flair to the culinary scene in La Paz.





(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | Mark Spahr, a self-taught baker, pioneers baking at Caffé El Triunfo. Among his cherished possessions is a copy of *The Woman's Home Companion Cookbook*, given to him by his mother. In San José, Jesus Aragon (shown seated on a bench with his father to his right - the Aragon patriarch) and his family use time-honored traditions to produce Mexican cheeses from the milk of their criollo cattle at their ranches.

starters in his breads in El Triunfo. Mark has recently embraced the baking method of slow cold fermentation that develops more complex and mildly acidic flavors. His final product has a natural sweetness and nut-like character. The French call this *Pain a l'Ancienne*. Mark, a self-taught baker, spent the entire summer developing his new recipes in his mesquite-fired wood oven specially designed for bread baking. A creative artist, never satisfied with what he's already done, he experimented by baking 12 loaves a day for three months before he was happy. In season, he bakes 50 loaves of his rustic breads a day. There are usually none left over. When we arrived, he was just pulling his whole-wheat golden raisin/fresh rosemary/roasted pumpkin seed and cranberry/walnut breads out of the oven. They're perfect - chewy, moist, and the best crust ever. We count ourselves among his

faithful fans who think nothing of driving over for his wood-fired pizzas, sandwiches, cakes and, of course, his breads.

More bread means...more cheese and Jesus Aragon in San José. Jesus's family has been making traditional Mexican cheeses at their ranches for generations. In fact, more than 100 years ago, his great grandfather used to bring the cheeses down from the mountains on burros to the port at Palmilla to ship to the mainland. The burros are a thing of the past, but the cheese is still made at some of the very same ranchos with milk from the Aragon's *criollo* cattle - a mix of Brahma and Holstein - that eat an organic feed that contains no chemicals or hormones. Jesus oversees the continuing production of the traditional *cotija* and *panela* cheeses, and with an eye to the contemporary market, spent the last three years developing an aged

version of the *cotija*. These cheeses are aged in a temperature and humidity controlled cave for three to six months, and each one has its own distinctive characteristics. Jesus's *queso añejo*, as he calls it, are big rounds of rustic country cheese packaged in locally made, undyed cotton bags.

Aside from driving out to the Whitt's farm, we didn't have to travel far to find an incredible array of dedicated people who are just trying to make food better.

One might think that the artisanal, small-batch food movement is something new to Baja. In fact, it's continuing a tradition that's been here for hundreds of years. What has changed is society's newly found awareness and interest in all-natural, locally produced foods, and these traditional and contemporary artisan's ability to market their products to a broader audience - even if it's just out of the back of a pickup truck parked on the side of the highway. **El Fin!**

For more information on the products in this story:

Jesus Aragon's Cheeses:
San José Organic Market:
<http://www.sanjomo.com>

Cabo Organic Farmer's Market:
<http://www.caboorganicmarket.com>

Cheese Guy on Side of the Road:
Just north of the intersection of Hwy 19 and Hwy 1

Don Pablo Marmalades and Seasoned Salts:
Sabores de Mexico: Francisco I Madero (between Constitucion and 5 de Mayo), La Paz, BCS <http://saboresdemexico.mx>

Hotel California Seasoned Salts:
Hotel California Emporio: Benito Juarez at Morelos and Marquez de Leon, Todos Santos, BCS

Les Carmona's Breads:
Pan de Les Bakery: Francisco I Madero 1235 (between Constitucion and 5 de Mayo), La Paz, BCS

Punta Espiritu Breads:
San José Organic Market:
<http://www.sanjomo.com>

The Sausage Lady:
La Paz Farmer's Market:
Every Tuesday and Saturday in front of Sabores de Mexico, La Paz, BCS

Tre Galline Meats and Pastas:
Café Todos Santos: Calle Centenario #33, Todos Santos, BCS

Mark Spahr's Breads:
Caffé El Triunfo: Triunfo, BCS

Whitts End Rancho Goat Cheeses:
San José Organic Market:
<http://www.sanjomo.com>

Whitt's End Rancho Organic Market:
Cabo del Este, BCS
Fridays from December through April