



The

ULTIMATE

Northern California *maestro pasticcere* Gary Rulli has mastered the art of *panettone*, and shares it with *Ambassador* for the holidays

Sweet Tooth

Text and photos by Matt Villano

Never in history had Italy's Accademia Maestri Pasticceri, the Academy of Master Pastry Chefs, invited a U.S.-born pastry chef to join its ranks—until the group's head honchos asked Gary Rulli to come aboard.

Rulli, a pastry chef based in Northern California's San Francisco Bay Area, certainly is worthy of the honor. For the better part of the last two decades, Rulli has baked cookies and pastries that pay homage to sweets from Northern Italy—treats such as *panforte*, *torte della nonna*, and *baba rum*, to name a few. His specialty, however, is traditional Milanese *panettone*, complete with candied citron and orange peels from Agrimontana (a famous candied fruit producer in Italy).

Every 1,200-gram batch of Rulli's *panettone* yields 50 loaves. In any given holiday season, Rulli will bake 6,000 pounds of *panettone* between November 1 and January 1. To put that into perspective, that's enough fruitcakes for every family in a small city.

"People in the U.S. know *panettone* as these factory-made fruitcakes that last forever and are therefore perfect to give as gifts," he says. "The truth is that when made fresh, *panettone* require quite a bit of skill, and can be incredibly delicious."

Humble beginnings

In his rise to international pastry stardom, Rulli never has strayed too far from home. Born in San Francisco, California, and raised in nearby Terra Linda, at the age of 19 he embarked on a trip to Italy that sparked his interest in Old World baking traditions. Rulli apprenticed under master pastry chefs in Milan and Torino (known as *levitistas*) to learn the time-honored traditions of Northern Italian pastry-making.

Rulli returned from Italy to his home base in Marin and rented space in a large San Francisco pie factory for a wholesale business baking cakes and his signature *panettone*. Eventually, in 1988, he and his wife, Jeannie, were able to open his downtown Larkspur *pasticceria* in the shadow of Mount Tamalpais. In the 1990s, the Rullis expanded their pastry shop into two neighboring storefronts. Most recently, the Rullis reintroduced themselves as Emporio Rulli, Inc., a mini-empire that today comprises a Caffeteria, Pasticceria, Torrefazione, Enoteca and Emporio.

Over the last decade, Rulli also has become a prominent figure in several communities. Locally, he is a member of the Larkspur Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Larkspur Community Association. On a broader scale, Rulli also is a

member of the Amici Dell'Italia Foundation, as well as the National Italian American Foundation.

Transplanted tradition

Despite his American heritage, Rulli's craft is 100 percent Italian. Case in point: the "mother" yeast for his panettone. The starter itself dates back more than a century; Rulli got it from his mentor, Achelle Brena, who got it from another maestro pasticciere in L'Ecco 50 years before that. When Rulli completed his apprenticeship in Milan, he brought the starter back to the U.S. He's used it ever since; his starter yeast is a decade older than his eldest son.

This natural yeast makes all the difference; unlike commercial yeast that most U.S.-based panettone bakers use, the natural yeast is unpredictable, dynamic. The yeast itself is very delicate; it must remain at a certain Ph level to retain its sweetness. As such, the rules of making dough are very stringent: Rulli must maintain a 2:1 ratio of flour to butter as he goes along. This means avoiding any excess butter or grease, and eschewing adding flour to the batter as chefs shape the loaves.

"It's like playing with Mother Nature; you have to be immaculate with it or it doesn't come out right," he said.

Brena, who was recently visiting from Italy, agreed: "In certain cities, if there's so much as too much chlorine in the water, the entire process can be thrown off," he said in Italian.

Once they get the ratios just right, Rulli and a staff of four assistants add to the dough a number of important imported ingredients: candied citron and orange peel as well as Aroma Panettone, or Italian citrus flavoring. They also toss in some of the finest local ingredients they can find: particularly California golden raisins.



Gary Rulli and his mentor from Italy, Achelle Brena, pose with Rulli's original yeast from Italy. Brena gave Rulli the starter more than 20 years ago.

Debunking myths

The result, of course, is delectable. Rulli's panettone come in four varieties: the traditional Milanese version with raisins, candied citron and candied orange peel; Panettone Paradiso, with walnuts, Valhrona chocolate, and almond paste; the "Veneziana," with candied orange peel, almond paste and imported Italian sugar crystals on top; and the "Genovese," which is like the Milanese, only heavier. ➤

Located in an historic downtown neighborhood, Emporio Rulli Larkspur is a quaint café featuring a menu of Italian-style pastries, cakes, coffees, sandwiches, soups and wines.



During an ordinary month, Rulli usually makes only one batch of panettone, which yields maybe 50 loaves. Toward the holiday season, however, the panettone business takes up 60 to 70 percent of his time, and he makes a batch just about every day, tending to the starter yeast every four hours.

“One of the reasons there aren’t many pastry chefs here in the U.S. who make panettone this way is because it’s so involved,” he says, noting that during the holiday season, the mother yeast must be refreshed every four hours. “You really have to dedicate yourself if you want to do it right.”

This year, of course, will be slightly different. In November, Rulli will go to Naples to be inducted into the Accademia Maestri Pasticceri and judge the organization’s annual pastry contest. It will be the first time a U.S.-born pastry chef will be judging Italian bakers. And for Rulli, it undoubtedly will be the realization of a lifelong dream. ▲

To learn more about Gary Rulli and his various businesses, visit www.rulli.com. Matt Villano is a freelance writer and editor based in Healdsburg, California.



Six panettonnes sit on a rack, waiting to be cooked at Gary Rulli's bakery in Larkspur, California.



Rulli and Brena weigh and measure dough for individual panettonnes. Each item can weigh no more than one pound.

Rulli at work in his kitchen.

