His daily bread

If David Handley is working the ER at Rochester’s Olmsted Medical Center over a weekend, chances are you’ll find fresh-baked bread in the break room. Handley, an emergency medicine physician, has become known for his artisanal bread. He’s been featured in the Post-Bulletin for his craft and regularly teaches bread-making classes through community ed. He bakes about three times a week and maintains a website (artisanbreads123.com), on which he posts some of the recipes he’s either developed or adapted.

For Handley, baking has been a part of his life since he was a child. His mother was a home economics teacher. “She taught me how,” he says. “Her breads and pastries are some of my fondest memories. She did a whole wheat bread at the holidays that I just loved as well as cinnamon twist pastries that I still bake today.” Even during medical school and residency, he occasionally found time to make some whole wheat loaves.

“There are a lot of similarities between baking and medicine,” he says. “Both are a mixture of art and science, and a lot of variables go into each. But in medicine, you have to live with your mistakes, and in baking, you get to eat your mistakes.”

Handley says he got into teaching baking when he realized it would be a way, other than medicine, he could give back to the community. For a number of years, he volunteered at the Salvation Army’s free clinic in Rochester, but he grew frustrated. “The patients were a lot of the same ones I would see in the ED, and we had very few resources. I got kind of burned out,” he explains.

He now teaches about 12 classes a year on everything from basic bread making to baking for health. During the two-hour sessions, which are held in a high school home ec room, he talks about ingredients (including a “seed of the month”—flax, sesame, chia, pumpkin, “whatever the health experts are talking about at the time”), the history of baking, and the fine points of mixing and fermenting dough. Participants sample loaves he brings to class and take their dough home to finish.

Some of his students have been his co-workers. One is Rochester physician Noel Peterson, MD, whom Handley describes as “an avid baker now.” And he’s passing his love of the craft on to others in his family. Handley’s 26-year-old stepson and 24-year-old stepdaughter occasionally bake. But his 16-year-old daughters “still prefer grocery store bread.”

In addition to developing recipes and making bread and pastries, Handley and his wife, Chris, enjoy what he calls “baking tourism.” When they travel, they visit bakeries (he often tries to sneak around the back to take a look at the ovens and other equipment).

This summer, Handley says they plan to build an outdoor oven—an extension of another one of his many interests, natural building. He recently constructed an underground barn on his 35-acre property, True Nature Farm (truenaturefarm.com), which is north of Rochester. There he keeps half a dozen goats to clear away the brush. He also cultivates trees that he sells online and operates a pick-your-own blueberry operation. (Handley started out studying plant biology until he realized he wasn’t cut out for lab work and decided to become a physician instead.) “I love to explore and see what there is to do in the world,” he says. – KIM KISER