

# ALTERNATIVE SHAPING OF FRENCH DOUGH

with Jeffrey Hamelman

## ÉPIS DE BLÉ

*Prerequisite for this class: “Breads From The Hearth: Baguettes” class*

“Sheaf of wheat” is the translation of the French “épi de blé.” An épi, as it is commonly called, is a wonderfully simple way to transform your delicious baguette into a presentation piece. Each section is easily torn off, becoming its own aesthetically pleasing hearth bread roll. This class begins at the point when your baguette has risen and is ready to go in the oven. If you don’t have a favorite baguette recipe, use the baguette recipe from the “Breads from the Hearth” class. As for a traditional baguette, do not slash (score) the loaf. Instead, you will cut it with a pair of large scissors. And finally, you may want to dress it up further with a dusting of flour or seeds. Here we go!

### PREPARING TO CUT

Position the risen baguette onto a baker’s peel, using a light dusting of cornmeal on the peel to prevent sticking. The peel allows for ease in transferring the loaf to the preheated baking stone in your oven. If you don’t have a baking stone, your épi can be cut and baked on a parchment-lined or cornmeal-dusted cookie sheet. However, a baking stone will give a much crisper crust. Cornmeal on your peel will prevent sticking (**Figure 1.**) Right-handed bakers will work from the left end of the baguette to the right end, and vice versa for lefties. Open your scissors wide enough so that the points are positioned outside the dough. Hold the scissors in a shallow angle, about 20° above horizontal. Jeffrey is left-handed and is cutting from his right to left (**Figure 2.**)



Figure 1



Figure 2

### THE CUT

Snip the dough, and push it to the far side of the loaf—away from you (**Figure 3.**) *Each snip should be approximately three-fourths of the way through the diameter of the loaf at a 20° angle.* Take a second snip, about the same size as the first, and pull it to the near side of the loaf—toward you (**Figure 4.**) Continue to snip at a 20° angle in a uniform fashion. Continue taking snips, at equal intervals, laying them alternately from side to side until the entire length of the baguette has been cut (**Figure 5.**) Uniformity is extremely important and comes with practice. Continue snipping to the end.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

## PRECAUTIONS

**Improper Cut #1** Be sure to hold the scissors at a shallow angle to get the most graceful results. The image below illustrates an improper scissor angle, almost vertical to the loaf. The inset photo shows the proper angle of about 20° above horizontal (**Figure 6.**) Notice how the improperly cut epi does not open out and give the well-defined points on each side (**Figure 7.**)

**Improper Cut #2** If the loaf is cut too deeply, the baked epi will be quite fragile and break easily. On the other hand, if it isn't cut deeply enough, the epi will look somewhat coarse, as in the photo below. This shows an epi that is cut too shallowly. Again, the proper cut is three-fourths of the way through the loaf. Notice the tiny peaks that protrude like a mohawk, barely moving to the side (**Figure 8.**)

Here are some before and after shots. Notice how the second epi has very little definition and the third has almost none. Don't worry if your first attempts come out this way. You now know what to change to improve them and they'll still taste great! *Top to bottom:* The top epi was cut at the proper angle and depth. The center epi was too vertical. The bottom epi was cut too shallow (**Figures 9 and 10.**)



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

## BAKING

Your épi is ready to bake. If you used the baguette recipe from the “Breads from the Hearth” class, you will follow the same steps. Your oven and baking stone need to be preheated to 500°F. Reduce the oven heat to 475°F and bake the épi slightly less.

If you choose to dress up your plain épi, a dusting of flour or some seeds give just the right finished look (**Figure 11**.) As soon as your baguette is shaped, press it into a damp cloth to moisten the surface, then press it into a tray of flour or poppy seeds. It then rises and gets cut as previously instructed.



*Figure 11*