

Issue 9

# slice

from the Baking Industry Association  
for cafés, caterers and bakeries



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# Return to Dili

Ralph Plarre of the big Melbourne bakery firm Ferguson Plarre, Tom O'Toole, the famous Australian baker and motivational speaker, and Graham Heaven, well known to many New Zealand bakers as a bakery instructor and apprenticeship moderator, visited Timor in 2009 to help establish a bakery school in that war-ravaged land, the poorest country in South East Asia.

In 2010 the Silesian Sisters wrote asking them to return. They wanted help further developing their bakery school and expanding the variety of bread they could produce. Most importantly, they needed help creating jobs for the people.

## Ralph Plarre tells the story of their return.

Graham Heaven was the contact point, and got in touch with Tom and me to see if the Three Bakery Musketeers could go back to Dili and help them.

All three of us quickly agreed to go, with the proviso that our travel and accommodation be provided. This was agreed to by Sister Louz of the Silesian Sisters, who was our contact. Air travel was naturally by Qantas and Air North, but surprise – our accommodation was to be with the nuns at the convent and we were to leave on the second of January 2011.

Graham arranged for about 300 kilograms of ingredients (through the generous support of Weston Milling) to be shipped to Dili before our arrival, as we had no idea of what ingredients and what quality was there already. We had a good idea of the equipment at the convent, having seen it in packing cases in 2009.

It was a good plan but Graham learnt about four weeks before we were due to leave that the ship had been diverted to Singapore and would arrive in Dili about three weeks after we were to return home!

So – plan B – Graham, with the extremely generous support (again) of Weston Milling, arranged for a smaller amount of the most critical ingredients such as bread improver to be flown to Dili in time for our arrival.

Well, getting a simple package of baking ingredients through customs was impossible! Three days after our arrival, a very helpful gentleman who knew his way around discovered that the ingredients were at the Dili Airport, which was about 10 minutes from the convent, but that something was wrong with the documentation.

Thankfully the resourceful Mr Graham Heaven had, just in case, packed a large

crate of gear that we had to lug through airports, customs and security to make sure we had some stuff we knew would work, together with manuals and recipes. It's a good thing it's hot in Dili as none of us had room for much clothing!

To this day we don't know what happened to the flown-in ingredients. Customs refused to clear them before we were to leave, but the good news was that the bakery already had in stock most of the ingredients we needed and the quality was good enough. It was all a "goer" as they say.

We arrived in Dili very early and went immediately to the convent, were shown our digs, which were basic, and at the earliest opportunity got to the bakery to see what they were making – if anything.

It turned out they were making small quantities of bread and rolls with a recipe rich in eggs, fat and sugar, and overproved to the point of being dry, crumbly, and unappealing.

We met three young East Timorese busily hand weighing and hand moulding bread rolls. This, as you can imagine, was taking forever.

Then at the back of the bakery we spotted a new bun divider and moulder, not being used. None of the bakery students spoke more than three words of English so with sign language we asked why they weren't using it. They told us it didn't work. We then enquired as to the whereabouts of the ring that held the dough in and made it work. They didn't know what we were talking about, so while Graham and Tom set about making a simple dough to test the flour, I set off looking for the bun moulder ring. Eventually I found it, covered in surface rust, on the floor of an old shed.



We cleaned it up, installed it and – hey presto – a ten-fold increase in productivity!

In the meantime Graham and Tom's dough was coming along nicely and by the end of the day we presented the nuns with some good bread rolls and loaves and fancy breads.

They were delighted with the first day's results and the line up of locals at the bakery door at 6am the next morning saw it all sold.

We soon realised that the Timorese palate is more orientated towards sweet than salt so we reduced the amount of salt used by a small amount.

The next day Graham made a great batch of ciabatta which the nuns thought was fantastic. Many of the nuns came originally from Europe, and of course East Timor was a Portuguese colony until 1975, so the European influence is still strong.

The tiny country has seen massive trauma since 1975, with nearly a third of the population lost through war. This has resulted in a large young population in desperate need of work. The immediate result of high youth unemployment is idle time and gangs.

The sisters hosted a convention of Silesian nuns from all over world when we were there and they loved the ciabatta.

Incidentally, living in the convent for the ten days we were in Dili turned out to be a marvellous experience. You have never seen a cleaner place, with the glazed tiled floor mopped and polished twice daily.

The food was simple, nutritious and delicious, with prayers before and after every meal

The nuns loved Graham Heaven's surname.



They were jovial and wonderful hosts as we joked and told stories in what limited language we had.

Although the students had little English, they picked up skills very quickly. Graham and Tom were the enthusiastic hands-on bakers while I did my best to interpret their mad actions to Sister Evangelina, who was in charge of the bakery. She noted down every detail. Good humour overcame any language difficulties.

Part of the adventure was to go into downtown Dili to find local ingredients that we could turn in to products such as Tom's famous savoury rolls.

Over the weekend there we hired a vehicle and drove into the mountains to a place called Maubisse where we stayed in an old Portuguese posada – an inn – and saw the local market on Sunday.

Apart from the occasional truckload of locals on their way to church (92% of the population is staunchly Catholic) you could have been in a world of hundreds of years ago. The main transport is small horses. The terrain is very mountainous and the roads treacherous.

Most of the locals in Maubisse live a subsistence life, trading their wares and produce for necessities at the Sunday market. They were completely oblivious to us (the only westerners there). The scenery on the trip back to Dili was breathtaking with the temperature rising from a cool mountain 19 degrees to a stifling 32 back in Dili.

By the time we had to leave I think we did our job in helping the very needy and deserving people of Dili.

Productivity was massively (and easily) increased. We had halved their ingredient costs and produced a much better product with better keeping qualities. New products like ciabatta and savoury rolls were introduced. They now have the basis of a bakery that can earn its keep and provide gainful employment, and that can be expanded to provide even more jobs.

The nuns said they wanted us to come back when they gear up and need advice as to how to set up a retail shop in downtown Dili.

So the "Three Bakery Musketeers" may return to Dili again, a challenge that I'm sure we would accept, to try to help our northern neighbours in their efforts.

Article by Ralph Plarre, email [ralph.plarre@fergusonplarre.com.au](mailto:ralph.plarre@fergusonplarre.com.au)



**Above:** Tom O'Toole and Graham Heaven, both briefly confused perhaps, while a local baker gets on with business. **Below:** Graham Heaven knot confused. **Bottom:** Graham Heaven (left), with Ralph Plarre and Tom O'Toole (right) and unidentified bakery worker and nun.

