

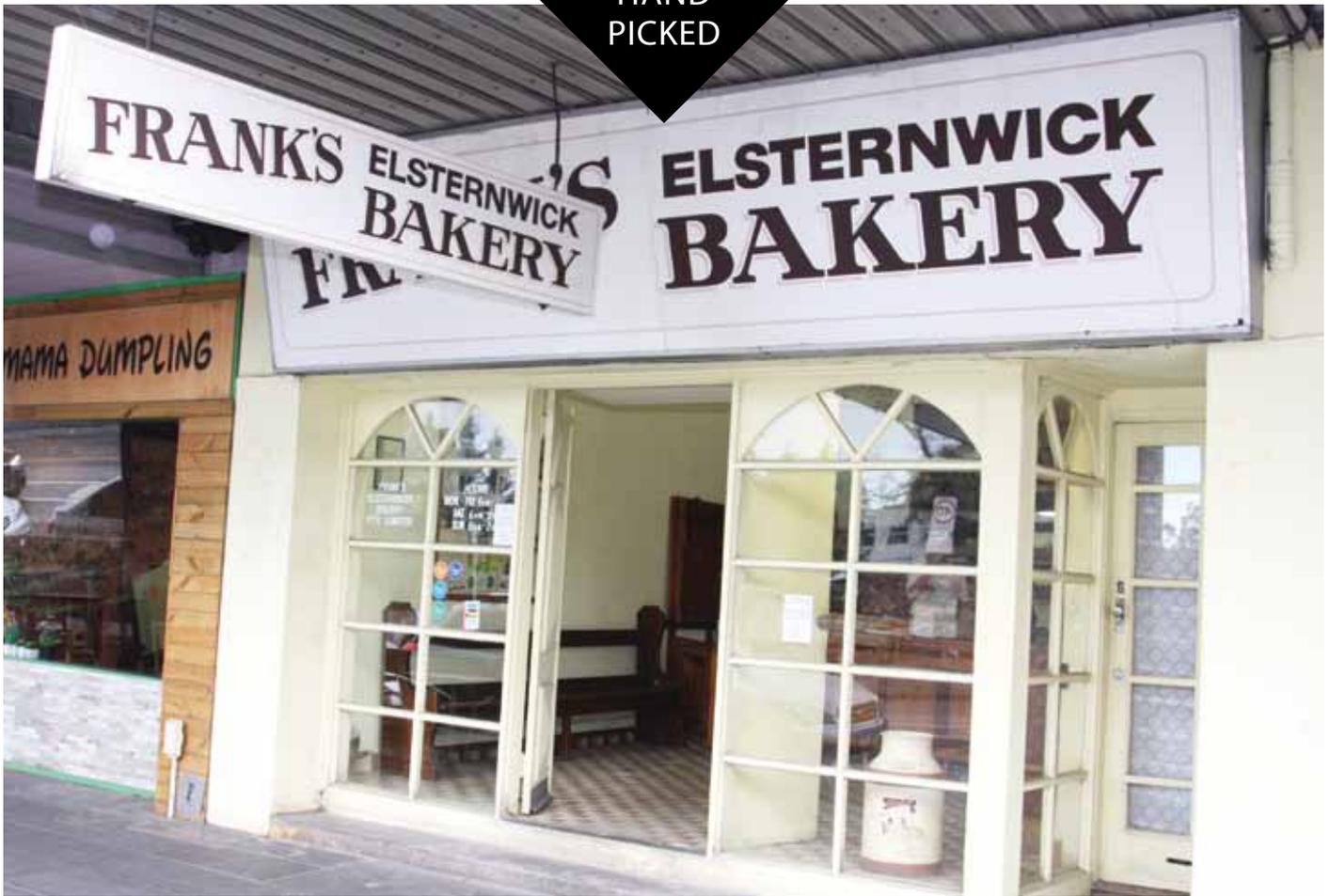
HAND
PICKED

A FLAIR FOR TRAD ITION //

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A passion for tradition, good bread and hard work has seen Melbourne-based Frank's Bakery flourish for more than five decades.

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In 1959, Frank Rieck packed up his belongings and left his hometown of Lengmoos—a small village between Munich and Salzburg in Bavaria, Germany—to travel to Australia to make a new life.

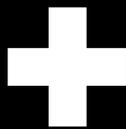
Included in those belongings was his prized “sour”, a sourdough starter he inherited from his mother. Passed down in his family from generation to generation, Frank estimates the starter, which he uses daily to create the sourdoughs and rye breads that line the shelves of Frank’s Bakery, to be up to 500 years old.

“We’ve tried to work out how old the sour is. The bakery in Bavaria has been there for 500 years and that’s where it came from,” Frank’s wife Elena laughs.

“Frank’s family has used it for about 250 years, and the culture was passed on to them. It just kept being passed on.”

When it comes to baking, Frank and Elena say it is in their very blood. As one of 13 children born into a line of bakers—a bakers dozen, Elena quips—Frank was the only one to take up the family business and at 11 was already working in his mother’s bakery. By 13 he was travelling for miles on a Monday morning to another village to perfect his skills, sleeping in the flour room through the week before returning home for the weekend.

After relocating to Australia, Frank landed a job at



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the Tip Top factory as one of 32 bakers. He spoke next to no English but was more than qualified for the job, which each day saw them producing 50,000 loaves of white bread.

“That number was just unbelievable. I had come from a small bakery in Bavaria,” Frank says.

“I stayed there for quite some time when all of a sudden I decided this was no good. Only white bread? We had to have some better bread here and, of course I had my sour, so I started this bakery.”

Housed in the inner city suburb of Elsternwick, Melbourne, Frank’s Bakery is something of an institution these days. Walking through the doors is akin to entering a time warp to the 1950s. The same décor is in place from when the bakery first opened, and Frank toils away overnight using a traditional peel to put the loaves into the oven.

It’s hard work born of passion, and sees Frank start his workday at 11pm four nights a week, with Elena joining him shortly after. They work through the night and into the mornings when the doors to Frank’s Bakery open at 6am. They close at either 4pm or when they’ve sold out of bread, whichever comes first.

“Everything we make is slow rising, with no preservatives. It takes time. We used to do this seven-days-a-week, but my husband is now 80 so I said to him ‘No, you just do the four days,’” Elena says.



"This isn't like a bakery you see in magazines where you've got those little electric ovens. We still have the old oven and you have to put so many loaves on the peel at one time, which are heavy when they aren't baked, and you have to place them in the huge oven without dropping them. It's an art."

At one stage, Frank's Bakery regularly had a line of customers winding its way down the street, although the rise of the supermarket has seen the lengthy lines slowly dwindle over the years. Nevertheless, Elena says the demand for their product consistently remains high, and they have customers who first came to the bakery as children that now lead their own children in by the hand.

"They wouldn't go anywhere else. I've had at least 15 people say today it's the best bread in the world. I think it's because we make quality not quantity. Everything is made from very good ingredients, and has no preservatives, no fat, no sugar, no dairy. It's the old-fashioned way," Elena says.

"We have people visit and say 'Oh, can't you come to Sydney or can't you come to the Gold Coast?' and I say no because the bread wouldn't be the same. It has to

be made here.

"The sour has been in this building for so long the whole building is full of the bacteria. Even if we moved and used the sour elsewhere the bread wouldn't taste the same."

Thanks to his Bavarian heritage, the range of bread at Frank's Bakery consists predominantly of sourdough or rye bread, although the traditional Bavarian pretzels are also popular and sell out most days.

Plain rye with caraway, sesame, sunflower or seven grains is lined up next to kibbled rye loaves, which is the purest rye you can eat. For this bread Elena says she painstakingly soaks and turns the rye for four days until all the seeds are softened. The end result is delicious bread that doesn't need a spread on it to be enjoyed.

"People come from everywhere for it, but it's heavy as a brick," Elena says, adding that despite the length of his baking career, each day Frank still holds up loaves fresh from the oven, exclaims "It's beautiful" and gives it a kiss.

For Frank, the joy found in baking has never diminished.

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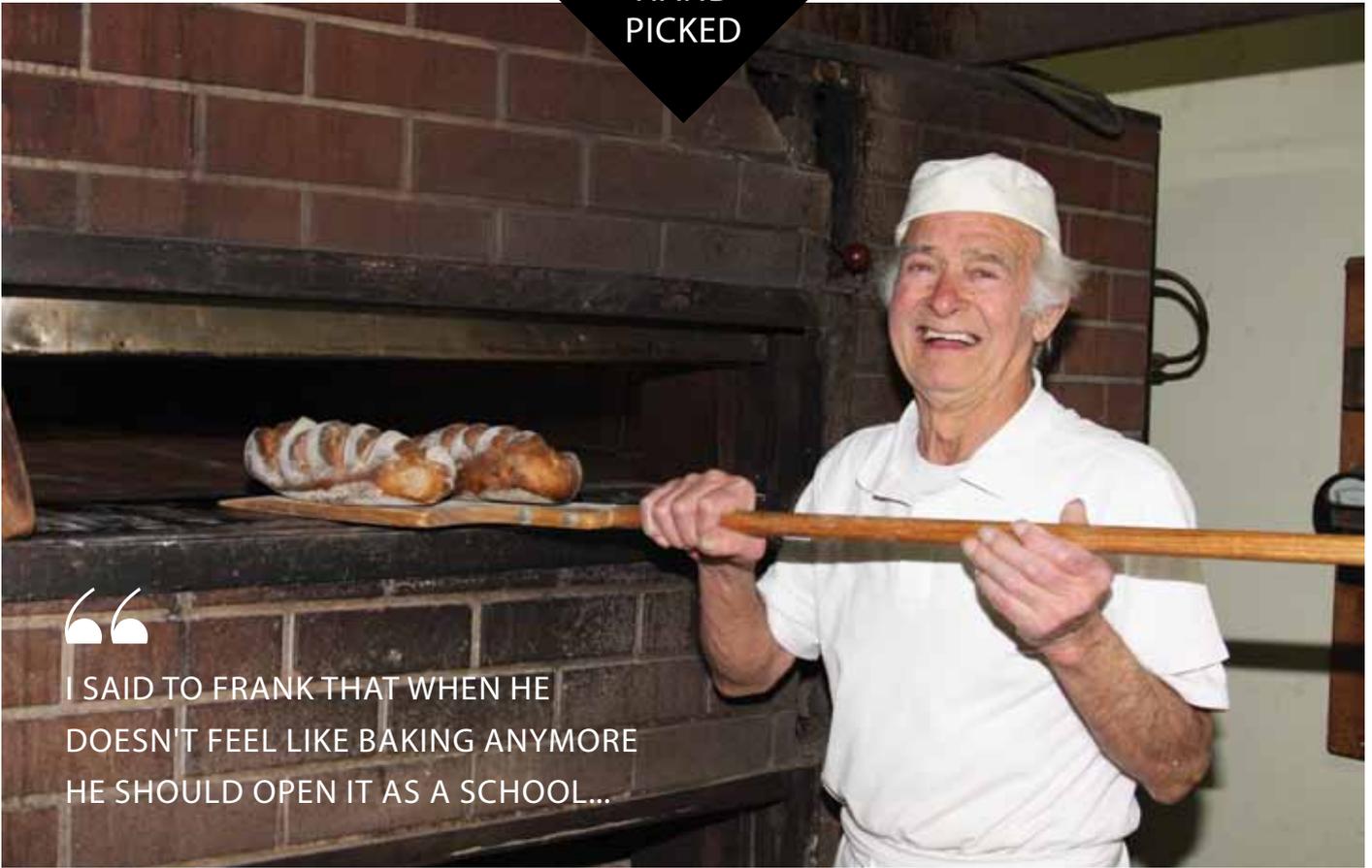
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Before the work starts all over again, Frank tends to his “sour” as he lovingly refers to his starter, adding a little flour, salt and water each day to keep it going.

Elena admits the long hours and their approach to baking is not an easy one, nor is it for everyone. For more than 50 years they have put in the hard work to produce the stellar products Frank’s Bakery has become known for. However, with talk turning to the future of the bakery Elena and Frank have a few ideas about what they think should happen.

The overnight work hours and dedication to maintaining both tradition and high quality products have seen more than a few bakers come through their doors before moving on to start their own businesses. At the moment there is just one other baker working at Frank’s Bakery who has been part of the institution for 25 years.

“I have said to Frank that when he doesn’t feel like baking anymore he should open it as a school and teach people how to bake like this. It will be very sad when we go because we can’t even teach this to anyone. No one wants to learn it, not even our son,” Elena says.

“The last person who applied here was a good French baker. We asked him to take the peel, and Frank can do two loaves with two hands—it’s not easy to do—but this boy couldn’t do it. He said ‘I thought I was good, but I’ve never seen anything like this. Not even in France.’”

In the meantime, for Frank and Elena, it all comes back to a love for good bread, and having a good time while making it.

“We do this for the passion, not the money and that’s a big difference,” Elena says.

“Now we just want to have fun.” 