



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Cistercian Father John Eudes Bamberger (right) and Cistercian Brother Alberic Gardner stack loaves of Monks' Bread into crates Sept. 3 at Piffard's Abbey of the Genesee. The monastery's bakery produces nearly 40,000 loaves of bread weekly.

Baking brothers earn their bread

Monks support abbey through sales of loaves

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

PIFFARD — Cistercian Brother Augustine Jackson removed a large batch of dough moving along a conveyor belt at the bakery in the Abbey of the Genesee.

"That was a double," he said of the oversized batch. "You only want singles."

All the other batches moving along were to become loaves of Monks' Bread, which is sold in many area grocery stores. Every Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, better known as Trappists, work in three- to five-hour shifts in the bakery. The monks produce between 35,000 and 40,000 loaves a week, and the loaves come in five varieties: white, rye, whole wheat, raisin and sunflower. Each week, the abbey donates between 3,000 and 5,000 loaves to area soup kitchens, Brother Jackson added.

"I do the stacking," Brother Jackson said, pointing to several plastic crates piled high. "It's a great little workout, a little aerobic exercise."

It's also a spiritual exercise, he noted, pointing out that "*ora et labora* — prayer and work" are the foundation of the monastic tradition.

"We think it would be dangerous

for us to get engaged in other less menial pursuits," he said. "Monks have always earned their own bread. They identify with the worker, with the poor. They don't just act out the working lifestyle, they do it."

Cistercian Brother Stephen Muller, who works the mixer, said: "I think for some people, they meet God in their work. You kind of feel one with the creator in creating things, making things better."

Elaborating on this theme of monastic work, Cistercian Father Jerome Machar, manager of the bakery and prior of the monastery, said that unlike other orders that subsist on donations, Cistercians work to be financially independent. This allows the monastery to create a workplace guided by Christian ethics.

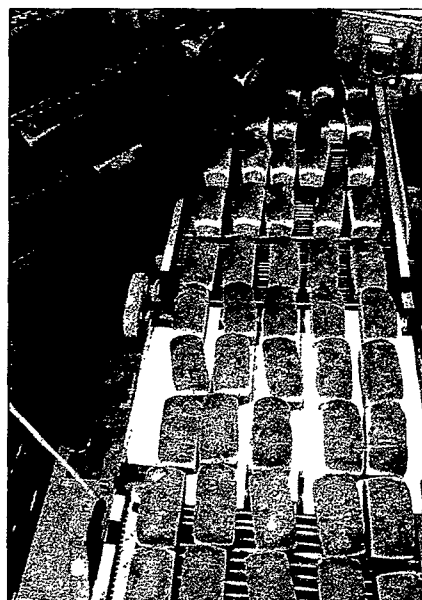
"Society is throw-away and dog-eat-dog," Father Machar said. "Either you're young, handsome and healthy or nothing. We don't want those values in here."

He noted that the bakery is geared toward the workers — many of whom are in their 60s — and not geared simply to production. The abbey has slowly automated various factory functions, he said, to accommodate the physical pace of older workers. However, monks never retire from bakery work unless they are physically unable to perform it, the prior said.

"We don't retire you till you're dead — and then you're only retired



Cistercian Brother Stephen Muller removes dough from the mixer.



Loaves of white bread make their way onto the cooling racks before packaging.

after you've been buried," he said with a slight chuckle.

Working alongside the monks are several "seculars" or lay people, including Ray Bair, a parishioner at St. Patrick's Church in Victor. Bair oversees the marketing and distribution of Monks' Bread, and noted that, in addition to the abbey, Monks' Bread is also produced by a franchise bakery in Bradenton, Fla.

The monks have scaled back their franchising in recent years, he said, and ended advertising several years ago in order to cut costs and pass along the savings to consumers. Fortunately, Father Machar added, the bakery has continually operated in the black, and its revenue supports the monastery, a number of charitable endeavors and Trappist houses in Brazil and Nigeria.

Bair said the secret to the success of Monks' Bread is the fact that "it's an excellent loaf of bread without a lot of junk in it." He added that Monks' Bread customers are loyal



Loaves of raisin bread are ready for delivery.

from generation to generation.

It was customer demand, in a sense, that created Monks' Bread, according to the abbey. Cistercian Brother Sylvester McCormick, who died in 2001, was a baker on board naval ships during World War II. He entered the order in 1948, and was a founder of the abbey in 1951. Brother McCormick baked loaves of bread for the community and for visitors who wanted more of his secret recipe, which was designed to taste delicious without butter. By 1956, a bakery was built to accommodate the demand for the bread. In addition to bread, the monks also currently bake a date and nut loaf, brownies and several varieties of fruitcake, all sold throughout the year at the abbey and in area stores at Christmastime.

Although Monks' Bread has put the abbey on the map, no monk ever joined the abbey to become a baker, Brother Jackson said. That would include Father Machar, who paused a moment when asked if he enjoyed running the bakery.

"I keep telling the abbot I want to get out of the office," he said. "And I'm always afraid he'll take me up on it."