

A big X rather than the big Cs

Two things stop me from writing another column about the new Big C - events are developing so rapidly now I can't keep up (and you're probably sick of the topic), and there's something coming up that is almost as important to me.

Hot cross buns.

You read right. It's Easter soon and something happened recently to remind me of my childhood when the spicy, delicious annual treat played a big part in our family.

They've just pulled Dad's old bakery down in Mangorei Rd in New Plymouth and the sight of all that corrugated iron and old concrete being demolished 58 years after it stopped producing bread revived some memories for Rob and me.

The leadup to Easter was Dad's biggest work fest. One year he went 57 hours without sleep to meet the orders for bread...and hot cross buns. He made the best ones I have ever eaten, then or since, better even than those produced by his father, Harry Tucker, who was in the second-to-last generation of bakers in our family.

Dad's secret recipe didn't stint on the spices and currants and he ensured his big, brown gems had a crusty exterior. Rob reckons that was done with a sugar and water mix painted on them before they went in the ovens.

That was another advantage compared with today. The bakery had traditional brick ovens, not the travelling versions of the modern age.

They also proofed the dough twice, which prevented the "green" doughs of today's mass bread baking.

We all had to help at Easter. There we were, Mum, me and Rob working for hours at huge kauri bench tops, sprinkling flour and rolling small lumps of dough, one in each hand, until we'd shaped them to the round state that went on big steel trays greased with margarine and slid into the ovens on the end of long-handled wooden peels.

The dough was cut into lumps by a round device the size of a car wheel. It had a big handle that lowered a set of blades into the dough container to produce pieces the size of a baby's fist.

The buns weren't on sale for as long as they are these days, just a week I recall, compared with the many weeks of now.

Are today's versions any good? I've long given up trying to find anything that approaches Dad's brilliant efforts, but understand the reasons why.

Some small specialist bakers probably make something approaching his, but supermarkets seem constrained by such things as how long they can bake anything, their oven time dictated by head office.

I decided to test them. While touring six New Plymouth supermarkets last week to observe their Big C precautions, I started to feel awkward walking around without shopping.

I hit on the idea of buying a six-pack of hot crossies at each and testing them according to criteria like texture, spiciness, fruit content, crustiness, aroma, size, price and overall appeal.

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All of them were nicely edible, but only one lot approached the crustiness achieved by Dad, and their origin was a surprise. They came from the Countdown at Spotswood, a place where we shopped regularly for a couple of years and whose bakers copped my criticism for not baking their bread long enough to produce a decent crust. Head office power rules, they said.

The Spotswood buns were good on every count. Some others might have been browner or spicier or had more fruit, but they were let down by their soft tops. Easily fixed by toasting them, I know, so they were worth buying without exception.

Lin and I couldn't eat them all after the test, so we kept the ones from Spotswood and Vogeltown Countdown and the city New World (very good apart from lack of crust) and gave the rest to neighbours.

I'd like to offer personal advice to all the bakers, but frankly I don't know for sure just how Dad managed the crusty tops, what else was in his sugar top coating, how much or what spices he used, how much fruit, and so on.

His vintage ovens may also have given him an advantage that can't be matched today.

Such thoughts flooded my brain and Rob's as we watched the old bakery building come down. The irony is I think it lasted this long not just because of sentiment or the thick corrugated iron that covered it, much painted by Dad, but because of its asbestos sidings.