The best ingredients cost a lot of dough, but

GAIL'S Bakery was founded in Hampstead five years ago by American Tom Molnar and Israeli Ran Avidan.

The management consultants dreamed of educating the British public to reject plastic-wrapped preservative-laden supermarket bread in favour of hand made additive free artisan loaves sold in "neighbourhood" bakeries.

They reasoned that just as we got used to paying £2 for a takeaway coffee, we would learn that £3 was well spent on a tasty rye or sourdough.

Molnar told the Ham&High at the time that the bread revolution was best started in one of London's "villages" like Hampstead, whose globetrotting residents already appreciated the value of great bakeries in other countries.

And if their modern take on the rustic old fashioned bakery was going to work, it would be in a place where people felt they belonged to a community.

Five years after the first branch opened on Hampstead High Street, Gail's sourdoughs, spelt breads, brioches, scones, muffins and croissants are selling like, ahem, hot cakes in London's affluent villages; St John's Wood, Chiswick, Clapham, Queen's Park and Notting Hill.

There's no doubting their prices are high, but a visit to an anonymous industrial estate in Hendon where Gail's products are made reveals why.

Using traditional methods and the best ingredients doesn't come cheap: I watched slabs of Lescure AOC butter from France handfolded into the croissants 80 times; doughs proving and resting for up to 48 hours before baking; cakes and breads crammed with expensive ingredients like olives and pecans; and fresh seeds, herbs and free range eggs tossed into the mixes. All this and the bread itself is still baked on stones, hand pulled from vast deep ovens on wooden paddles.

This hive of activity also serves Molnar and Avidan's separate company The Bread Factory, which supplies breads, viennoisery and patisserie wholesale to high end hotels and restaurants including Gordon Ramsay's empire, the Dorchester, Heston Blumenthal's restaurants, Waitrose and Occado.

A third business, The Flour Station, joint owned by Jamie Oliver, supplies the TV chef's own Italian influenced recipes for ciabatta, sourdoughs and focaccia to his London restaurant.

"Jamie is in love with good bread," says Avidan. "He has a hundred businesses and this is financially a tiny part of what he does but he is passionate about artisan baking."

He adds: "When we first started we didn't think of a wholesale business, we thought about providing great bread to the public not to chefs.

"We loved bread but didn't know how to produce beautiful great bread, we were looking for the knowhow to create a small artisan bakery and found that from the Bread Factory."

But the company wasn't doing very well and owner Gail Stephens, founder of Baker and Spice who is still a shareholder in the company, eventually relinquished control to Molnar and Avidan.

"To me Gail's is a contemporary British bakery, a celebration of bread and other baked products bringing a great true artisan product into a modern fun environment," says Avidan, a father of four who commutes between Israel and Golders Green.

He emphasises that Gail's concept is about being part of the community where the stores are based. "We are against chains, we hate chains, yet we are a chain. That's why each store has its own personality, why we do an annual garden party in Hampstead and get involved with local schools and community organisations and businesses, why we have started a loyalty card scheme in St John's Wood so every time you spend money in Gail's 10 percent goes to the local school.

"That's why it will never become a global concept because it would be impossible to expand and stick to what we do. Already our expansion is slower and more difficult than we first thought because it has taken longer to find the right shops in the right locations. We only open shops

Rough, ready, delicious – so very Japanese

Sake, seaweed, 'special sauce' and skewers (eventually), **Joseph Connolly** samples some Asian classics

SO very Japanese: when you telephone Jin Kichi to book a table, a recorded message produces a largely incomprehensible response which – if you ring again and listen more attentively – you can just about make out to be a seemingly expert melange of quite scrupulous politeness and the briskest of brush-offs: this is not a good time to call, don't leave a message – but do try again between 3 and 6pm when all will be fine: thank you! So I did that, and was told that for 7.30 on a Friday evening I could either sit at the bar or have a table downstairs.

Now I have never before been to Jin Kichi, and this made the place sound rather roomy and maybe even a little bit grand. And as I do not have to tell people who have been to Jin Kichi, it is most certainly neither thing. The 'bar' turned out to be a lino-clad shelf two feet from the door, so I was pleased that I had plumped for the downstairs table: less so when I saw it – at the very foot of the stairs in a windowless basement: small, bare, sticky and apparently in the kitchen.

The walls are pockmarked, the floor quarry tiled and the young Japanese and French staff – alternately bouncy and somnolent – gave the whole place the aura of some little cubby hole quite rapidly knocked up by students as a Rag Week pop-up, utilising any old scraps and offcuts that had come to hand. Air conditioning though, thank God – otherwise it would have been insufferable.

But I had heard good things about the food in this long-established and very popular Heath Street institution, so let's just see. My welcome was very friendly (with an undertow of apparent amazement: so very Japanese) and I set to skimming through the extraordinarily compendious menu as I awaited my guest: how many laminated pages …? Small and Vegetables, Soup, Sashimi, Sushi, Rolls, Grilled Skewers, Grills (without skewers), Simmered Dishes, Rice Dishes, Noodles, Pan Fried and Fried (in something else, then – a shovel, a Freedom Pass or a Birkin bag, conceivably). 216 variations in all (I know this because they are numbered – I'm not yet so bored nor geeky as to count them) and then a separate leaflet listing around two dozen 'specials'. Quite a few items were accompanied by a green diamond symbol, the accompanying glossary informing one that this meant 'with out meet'.

Adrian Bridge is a travel editor at the Daily Telegraph, and was pleased to be here because in three weeks' time he was going to Japan, and I think he wanted to get in a bit of practice. He'd like hot sake, he said – so we got a tiny little porcelain carafe of one of about eight on offer (rising to £59 a bottle … but this was £3.90). Called Cho-Kyu Kin-Jirushi, it was described as follows: 'It is elegant and a little sake of dry with the swelling'. Which sounded just the ticket. Tasted of rubbing alcohol, but Adrian seemed to appreciate it. I, being wise, had a glass of plum wine with ice. I know – but when in Japan … Actually, I rather liked it: the colour of whisky, and refreshingly sweetly fruity, in the manner of Pimm's. One was enough, though. Adrian was following with a Sapporo beer, but I wanted wine. There are but two: a Cote de Beaune and a Chablis: if you are going to offer just two, it may as well be these. My glass of burgundy was woeful, however – I doubt they flog much of it here, and this was from a bottle that had been opened God alone knows when. But a new bottle was rapidly uncorked, and this was fine.

To get us going, we ordered between us cooked black seaweed with vegetables and sesame, and a trio of skewers: chicken meat balls, shiitake mushrooms with 'special sauce' and asparagus and pork. The seaweed came – I liked it: it was cold and sweet and strangely moreish. No skewers, though. We filled in the time going mad trying to decide on how many dishes to order. I asked a very pretty Japanese waitress to guide us through this thing, and I feel positive that she did: she approached the task with gusto and a lot of smiling and I really did think it a terrible shame that by the grand finale I hadn't understood a single syllable she'd uttered. So I nodded and grinned and thanked her profusely and set to working it out myself.

There were many things that sounded appealing (a lot not: grilled bones of sea bream with salt, for instance) and eventually we'd decided on deep fried prawn tempura, grilled salmon teriyaki, udon noodles (they're the fat soft ones) in fish stock and a deep fried chicken thing in breadcrumbs. I toyed with Sukiyaki – though I always thought that she was the beauty introduced by Tiger Tanaka to James Bond in You Only Live Twice; but it would seem not.

So everything was lovely. Except … something was missing. What is it now …? What can it be …? It's on the tip of my tongue … except, of course, that it isn't: food. No skewers. Twenty minutes now, and no skewers. God we were hungry. The place was chocka, and everyone else seemed to be eating and enjoying themselves. Not us, though. Adrian was saying how much he was looking forward to his Japanese trip. And the food. Whether there or here, he didn't specify. Forty minutes. No skewers. "Excuse me," I ventured to the waitress. "Our skewers … are they coming?" She nodded excitedly fifty or so times and said "Yes. Coming coming coming." Right-o, then.

Ten minutes later, I could see that Adrian rather wished he'd brought sandwiches. It was all in the glazed-over eyes – although this could have been the sake (of dry, with the swelling). And then – Hallelujah! Skewers! Yes indeed – nearly one hour on, and three little skewers. The smoky chicken meatballs were very good indeed, the mushroom, and the crunchy asparagus with slivers of pork wrapped around them, rather the star of the show: so bloody starved I almost forgot to taste them, but just remembered in the nick of time.

And then everything came at once, this occasioning all sorts

Waiting game ... Joseph Connolly waits for his food to arrive at the Jin Kichi.

FACTFILE

❑ **JIN KICHI**
73 Heath Street, NW3
Tel 020-7794 6158
❑ Open Tues-Sun for dinner 6-11pm (Sun 10pm). Lunch Sat and Sun only 12.30-2pm.
❑ Food: ★★★★★★★☆☆☆
❑ Service: ★★★★★★★☆☆☆
❑ Cost: A lot of good food and modest drink for two people for around £60. Eventually.