

# FOOD SCENE

NEWS | REVIEWS | TIPS | TRENDS

## Twist on a Twist

Squabisch's savory and sweet pretzel creations draw long lines.

BY LEEANNE JONES

Classic salted pretzels stack the menu at the new Berkeley bakery.

Twenty-five minutes before its noon opening, I'm second in line outside Squabisch on Berkeley's Solano Avenue. Within minutes, there are a dozen of us—all first-timers. One came from San Francisco. Another saw the line wrapped around the block while shopping the day before and thought it must be a new pot shop.

Everyone is surprised that pretzels are the source of this enthusiasm—including owner Uli Elser. "It has super-exceeded my expectations," he says. "We sell out in two or three hours!"

But these aren't ordinary pretzels: They're soft twists made with a milk and butter batter and paired with fun ingredients, like lobster or salted caramel. The shop's name is a portmanteau of "squab" (Elser's favorite word; it's "phonetically super cool") and "Schwäbisch"—the language of Swabia, the southwestern region of Germany where his grandmother, and her pretzel recipe, came from.

For almost 20 years, Elser made pretzels casually and for Oktoberfest gatherings in his Berkeley neighborhood. In 2016, he started selling them at pop-ups and farmers markets, a side hustle to his music industry career. And then everything changed: Elser was laid off in 2019, the pandemic hit, and his wife (and shop co-owner), Sabine, found a space with reasonable rent in a great area. "I needed a new job, and I was more interested in making pretzels than going on Craigslist," says Elser.

The gamble clearly worked. Customers must plan ahead to taste one of 10 to 14 weekly rotating flavors, usually five classics (jalapeño cheddar, pretzel-wrapped bratwurst) and five specials (ricotta and Meyer lemon, salty s'mores). This spring, look for one with a quail egg, asiago, and bacon. "It looks like a nest—and it's a pain to make," says Elser, with a laugh, knowing people will line up for them. [squabisch.com](http://squabisch.com).