

At a small, independent furniture workshop where my father worked as a driver when I was maybe four or five, I saw workers lunch on fresh white government loaf with nothing more than a few drops of lemon juice and a sprinkle of salt. Back in early 1970s South Africa, that everyday loaf of subsidized white was a good loaf of bread and, notwithstanding the workers' spare seasoning, they ate it with relish. It's an image that endures: on a workbench, the bread, broken in two and resting on its white wrapping paper (fresh bread back then was delivered unwrapped to shops and, while still warm, the bread was sold wrapped in paper); the men in blue overalls talking and joking around the bench, tearing off small chunks of bread, adding a squeeze of lemon, a sprinkle of salt, popping the bread into their mouths.

Similarly embedded in my memory from a few years later, but in the realm of fantasy, was some sort of incredibly soft, snow-white bread bun in *Killer Punch*, the first Kung-fu film I saw. In the tavern that Kung-fu heroes typically visit for mid-plot feats and fights, Killer Punch sat down to a meal of a bun and soup. It looked like he was biting into a piece of white cloud. This is what bread should be like, I mused, and dreamed of one day eating a soft bun such as the one eaten by Killer Punch.

I like to think that the persistence of these memories has something to do with the elemental place of bread in social relations. It is basic, a common staple — from South African government loaf to the buns of Killer Punch — and bread has provided humans with sustenance *and* community for millennia. The word *companion* has its roots in the idea of sharing bread, from Latin for come together (com) + bread (panis). The sharing of bread, literally, informs a human fundamental: companionship, community.

Made of just water, salt (optional) and flour — ground corn, wheat, rice, lentils, teff — there's something elemental about bread. Almost every culture has such a basic food as staple: the unleavened flat breads of the Middle East and Eastern Europe, roti and dosas from the Asian subcontinent, the tortilla and arepa in the Americas, steamed buns of China and Japan, injera in Ethiopia, the black breads of Germany and Russia, and mass-produced sliced loaves everywhere.

Bread as staple has many advantages. Basic in production, it is a versatile food. It can last from several days to months if kept dry. *Hard tack* — the ship's biscuit — is that most basic, unleavened bread. Without yeast to ferment the dough, tack is dense as concrete. It is baked slowly into hard, ration-sized rounds or squares and can last long in dry conditions. In pre-modern days, it was a staple on ships, but had to be soaked in a soup or wine to make it chewable.

Bread is also versatile as a utensil. In medieval Europe, a trencher was a round of bread used as a plate, the left-over, gravy-sodden bread eaten afterwards or given to beggars or thrown to the dogs. The South African bunny-chow — hollowed out bread filled with curry — continues this tradition of bread as vessel.

Using the same ingredients, you can make better bread than a ship's biscuit. The ancient bread civilizations of the Middle East and Central Europe still eat unleavened flat bread made only from flour, water and salt. These breads are desirable when fresh *and* they can last long if kept dry and then used in soups and salads. Fatoush is a famed Palestinian salad that uses stale bread. Roti and tortilla are similar *quick* flat breads. They're made without a leavening agent and you can basically eat one of them within 30 minutes of first mixing the dough.

It is this very basic foodstuff that historians believe led to settled civilizations. The domestication of cereals promised a regular

source of food (it stores better than meat, fruit and vegetables) and led people to shun nomadism and stick it out in one place. The processing of cereals itself dates back 10,000 years. And even if the transformation of flour into bread involves complex chemical reactions, even if working flour into bread may require some skills, it is a food stuff basic enough in preparation to be easily copied and spread. It is both basic and powerful enough to take on symbolic power. Not only does it connote food in general, but it also has symbolic political power: to break bread with someone is to invite or affirm a common humanity. The high cost or absence of bread can lead to political upheaval. It is such that led to Marie Antoinette's infamous retort: Why cry for bread if there's such a thing as brioche? (Rich with butter and eggs, brioche is almost cake, thus the common mistranslation of the beheaded one's words "Give them brioche".)

Bread becomes more interesting — and more flavourful — when yeast is introduced into the dough. Most probably in Ancient Egypt 4,000 years ago, people discovered that a dough of water and flour left standing eventually turns sour. Adding this soured dough to fresh dough led the dough to puff and swell over a few hours, making for a bread that was aerated and thus lighter, and also tastier. This was the work, simply put, of yeast, a microscopic fungus that feeds on carbohydrates and produces carbon dioxide (aerating the dough), and lactobacillus, a bacterium that produces lactic acid (flavouring).

This yeast didn't come from a packet. Baker's yeast was only isolated and cultured for commercial purposes in the late 1800s. The yeast of that ancient Egyptian sourdough was wild yeast — in the air and in the flour. That's right: on one level, *leavened* bread is still just flour and water and salt (again, optional). Add water to flour, feed and refresh it with water and flour every 24 hours over a few days and, if the weather is nice and warm, wild yeast in the flour and air will get to work. Whatever the yeast cannot process, the lactobacillus (bacteria are everywhere) will take care of. In three or four days you'll have sourdough, the rising agent used in bread for more than 4,000 years.

I love bread. From early on, I gained sandwich-making skills from my mother. As a lower-middle-class child, I grew up mainly on sliced white. (A whole essay can be written about the social snobbery of choosing more refined sliced white over cheaper and more nutritious sliced brown. It's an age-old division that stretches back even further than Marie Antoinette's bread-brioche gaff. While white flour makes softer bread, it requires more processing and is thus more expensive.) But somewhere in my growing up, I was introduced to sourdough rye bread. Every now and then, on a Wednesday, a friend of the family working as a driver at Cape Town's Groote Schuur Hospital would bring us a loaf of this magical bread from Wrenschtown Bakery on Main Road, Observatory. It wasn't 100% rye (like German pumpernickel), probably at most 20% rye, and wheat flour making up the rest. But it was dark and tangy, with a crisp crust and chewy interior. Eaten fresh, this bread was superb — perfect for cheddar. Up to five days old, the bread was still enjoyable. Drier, more chewy, but you could still *enjoy* it without having to toast it. Sliced white was and is no comparison.

Commercially produced bread — white, brown or whole wheat — is terrible. While commercial baking has used additives to accelerate the process and *improve* bread baking for decades, you can be sure that the profit imperative has made it worse. Commercial bread contains additives to prolong shelf-life (preservatives), improve texture (fat/emulsifiers) and appearance

(bleached flour), and treatment agents that allow faster gluten development and rising. Some bread even contains soybean flour — I imagine to stretch the flour and bring production costs down even further. The upshot: terrible bread. It clings to your palate, it's light as tissue paper, it gets mouldy quickly. Even loaves supposedly mimicking your grandma or your aunt's home-baked bread, like Uncle Salie's or Tant Anna's, fall far short. And I have grown tired of buying whatever version of these commercial loaves, eating two clacky slices on the day, then watching as the bread sweats and grows mouldy even in the darkest cupboard.

I have yearned too long for the taste of sourdough rye from Wrenschtown, the bakery now long gone. You can buy sourdough breads at various hipster conurbations and artisanal bakeries around Cape Town. But the bread's expensive and pretentious. Overcompensating for the trend in artisanal baking, the crust is often too crusty and the crumb too open (i.e. big airy holes in the bread through which your butter and honey escape). I've occasionally bought bread at these places, but the expense, pretensions and clientele leave me cold.

So I set out to learn baking bread in August 2016, with the help of some of the millions of blogposts and YouTube videos on sourdough and baking. It's a confusing mess, ranging from skeleton recipes that assume you know everything already to treatises drier than hard tack by science-obsessed bakers. Rules about what you *ought* and *ought not* do with the sourdough, turning it into an object far more precious than a pharaoh's riches.

While I was trying to get my sourdough fermenting (winter 2017, so it took seven days), I tried my hand at baking an easy baguette using instant yeast. Having never baked bread, save for a very basic flat bread two decades ago, I was surprised at the transformation I had wrought on a mound of flour, some water, and salt. Bloody well, I had made bread! And it was delicious, even if without the tang of sourdough.

The sourdough breads have been more tricky. It takes time to get used to the rhythms of the sourdough starter — its rising and falling, and when it is right to use for dough. The starter itself can be well abused — once going, you don't need to refresh it every day (but then keep it refrigerated). Brown Mother, an original whole wheat starter I began seven months before this writing, is still going, but I keep it half-forgotten in the fridge. Every month or so, I take it out, pour off the alcohol (hooch), let it get to room temperature, refresh, wait a few hours to see that it is still active, and return it to the fridge to be forgotten. In general, whole wheat starters take more easily, but are also hardy.

The rye starter I use once every week (first child of Brown Mother) is also kept in the fridge, and taken out 24 hours before use to gain good temperature and become active, before it is used. But starting and maintaining a sourdough starter is not as bothersome as many of the expert blogs proclaim. The first three to seven days of starting one is the most bother, and that amounts to ten minutes a day refreshing the flour and water as you wait for it to start fermenting. And once fermentation has started, you can keep it in the fridge if you don't bake with it every day.

My first few breads varied in quality as I struggled to get used to the rhythms of the sourdough starter. Although they tasted good, some were flat, some were dense and heavy, some were brick hard. But I eventually hit on a recipe — a supposed Italian peasant bread — that I have modified to use sourdough instead of instant yeast. I have found consistency in terms of rise and texture and now bake one every week. It's not baked as a speciality — it is my everyday bread. I change the mix of flours every now and then. Its main flour component is (white) bread flour, but I add different amounts of whole wheat, rye and cornmeal to it. It is still not the Wrenschtown loaf of my childhood, but I'll get there. Soon come.

Soon come, because sourdough baking requires time. Instant (dry) or fresh baker's yeast accelerates the fermentation and proving of dough; with sourdough, the same process is slowed down a lot. The upshot is that experimentation comes at a high cost in time, but, inshallah, before long I hope to bake that childhood bread.

That sourdough baking requires time should not be discouragement, though. Most of the time that the dough is developing, you're not sitting around watching the dough. You have to be home, of course, but every hour or so, you have to manipulate the dough. This fits perfectly with home-bound freelancers, who need to take a break from reading or writing every hour.

So the bread I bake starts the night before when you mix your *preferment*. Also known as *biga* (Italian), *poolish* (probably from Polish bakers' method), *levain* (French, root of leaven), and *sponge*, the preferment is a mixture of water and flour with the sourdough starter (you can use instant yeast). It is left to ferment for 10-12 hours. This is then mixed with more flour, water and salt to make the final dough. From the mixing of the final dough to the bread coming out of the oven takes about five hours, but your involvement with the dough amounts to probably an hour of work, while the yeast and water is doing all the real work.

Another problem with baking — not exclusive to sourdough baking — is that (wheat) flour has different water absorption rates dependent on its region of origin. North American recipes, for instance, use far more water than South African flours require. It's a bit confusing. High water content has advantages: it's used in lieu of kneading and helps to get an open crumb. But it makes the dough sticky and difficult to work with. So when a North American no-knead recipe calls for X amount of water, you'd most probably have to reduce that by almost 40% for South African flours. For this reason, experienced bakers work by the feel of the dough — they add water bit by bit until the dough has the right consistency.

But all these amount to side issues. Whether you use instant yeast (quicker) or sourdough (tastier), there remain many advantages to baking your own bread. You control what you put into the bread and invariably the bread tastes much better than commercial bread. It allows for far more personal gratification than you get from frying an egg. Share your bread with a friend, and that gratification becomes communal and tenfold. Use your own sourdough starter, and establish a connection with the Ancients as you marvel at the transformation of water and flour into bread, elemental in ingredient, transcendent as metaphor. Bread, the Bread of Life.