



I look at evidence of place and feel like I come from nowhere. My nowhere is an American suburb, and going somewhere doesn’t change my nowhere, because where I go is not where I come from. So I bake bread after bread. The flatter it is, the more it transports me. I used to bake breads that came from somewhere else, but now I make breads without history, born from intuition and whim, because they’re evidence of my immediate circumstance. This is what bread has always been, everywhere: a direct product of our lives, proof we exist, even if we come from nowhere.

It’s easy to overlook bread’s potential as a canary in the coal mine, or as a sponge, or better yet, as a spore — an atom that breaks off from the mass and carries it elsewhere. Tiny, fractal, and totally necessary for survival. I can make up a long story about a place knowing only how someone bakes their bread there. Many of the most evocative breads are flat, round or rectangular, and inconsequential looking. I like them the best, above and beyond the elaborately piled and lofted ones of the global North, where wheat with plenty of the necessary proteins for a high-rising loaf grows well in the temperate climates. The affection for these European style breads has been exported and profited from for a long time. Bread follows money, silently, unless there is neither left. Then things get louder.

Bread is practically indefinable, but different loaves do come from somewhere in particular — piadina from Romagna, Italy, nan-e barbari from Iran, cozonac from Romania, neighbor to its Ashkenazi Jewish cousin babka. Still, since it first rose, bread has been framed as a gift from the heavens, a kind of divine presentation (“Take this, it is my body”, said Jesus Christ himself, offering the sacramental bread in an outstretched hand to his disciples). But there’s more evidence of humans than of holiness in the story of bread. It took intuition, innovation, coercion and labor to turn wheat into flour, and dough into a leavened, digestible staple, and later a processed, malnourishing one, too. From the domestication of grain, to the harnessing of fermentation, the development of milling and sifting systems, the mastery of ovens, and later the global distribution of patented wheat seeds and subsidized white bread, we have a story evidential of the spectrum of human potential. Ingenuity, opportunity, imagination, expansion, accumulation, consolidation, manipulation, extraction, and destruction.

If one wants to change the narrative of a place, particularly to take it and make it theirs, they’re wise to import their own daily bread and make it cheap and plentiful. Early colonizers took flour with them and generally made bread in their image where they went (white, inflated). American suburbs like my own have domestically grown wheat because the European settlers brought the grain with them and planted it upon arrival. Takes on the baguette are found throughout Africa and South Asia, evidence of the French imperial tour, and the flour tortilla of Mexico is a product of a similar colonial enterprise undertaken there by the Spanish. More recently, the hybrid wheat that replaced regional varieties throughout India in the 1960s and ‘70s was developed by an Iowa-born Rockefeller grantee who later won the Nobel Peace Prize. And from day one, colonists and early statesmen used religion and bread (its staff), to encourage their subjects towards ‘civility’. See Enkidu, the barbarian of Gilgamesh (the earliest of epics, which came out of Uruk, the world’s first city-state), who was civilized by bread and wine and sex (notably all products of some kind of ferment, or foment) and turned into a worthy citizen of an urban sphere, a taxpayer.

The utility of bread, be it spiritual, bodily, economic, or otherwise, is literally a tale as old as time. Flatbreads were there at the start, and remain the staple of much of the bread-eating world. They’ve survived because they embody that utility: they’re versatile, variable and convenient. I spend a lot of time searching through virtual rubble for them from over here in my nowhere, west of somewhere. I can’t always keep straight the names of the hundreds of different types I’ve recorded over the years, unless I’ve tasted them (most, I haven’t). Lahoh, rugag, bammy, mana’eesh, baghrir, samoon, chumuth, lefse, doday, sheermal, aish, bazlama, poee, koulibij naan...

A01 Sushka
A02 Baranka
A03 Bublik
A04 Covrigi
A05 Ka’ak
A06 Matnakash
A07 Sheermal
A08 Ksra
A09 Matlouh
A10 Harcha

B01 Bammy
B02 Medfouna
B03 Mbesses
B04 Gozleme
B05 Sabayad
B06 Mahjouba
B07 Katma
B08 Qutab
B09 Rougag
B10 Katlama

C01 Paratha
C02 Pone
C03 Bannock
C04 Flatkaka
C05 Taboon
C06 Aish Balady
C07 Poee
C08 Bazlama
C09 Sfenz
C10 Mekitsa

D01 Sopapilla
D02 Fry Bread
D03 Bishi
D04 Nan-e Barbari
D05 Sangak
D06 Samoon
D07 Shotis Puri
D08 Khambir
D09 Bing Zi
D10 Qatlama

E01 Tahinov Hatz
E02 Simit
E03 Shao Bing
E04 Mankoush
E05 Mana’eesh
E06 Lahmajun
E07 Goraasa
E08 Taftan
E09 Batbout
E10 Khoubz

F01 Chapati
F02 Yufka
F03 Casabe
F04 Kisra
F05 Baghrir
F06 Crumpets
F07 Lahoh
F08 Injera
F09 Hopper
F10 Noni Toki

G01 Matzah
G02 Chumuth
G03 Rumali Roti
G04 Sobaquera
G05 Doday
G06 Lavash
G07 Ngome
G08 Lefse
G09 Blini
G10 Rougag

H01 Sultsinat
H02 Piki
H03 Tortillas de Maíz
H04 Roqaq
H05 Pane Carasau
H06 Laufabrauð
H07 Obi Non
H08 Himbasha
H09 Kesra
H10 Libba

I find flatbreads the most representative of their place because their form aligns them all, creating subtle contrast through comparison. Piki, a flatbread of the Hopi Nation, is a papery roll made of finely ground local blue corn flour cooked on a griddle set over a fire; injera is a more pliable and spongey flatbread from Ethiopia, made from a batter of fermented ground teff, which grows well there; kisra, a sorghum pancake from Sudan, Chad and South Sudan, is formally somewhere between the two; rieska from Finland is made with the barley or rye that grows in the harsher cold climates of the North; and the barley, turtle bean and ground pea porridge bread paba that’s found in Ladakh, where the high altitudes deter many other grains from growing, might scarcely be recognized elsewhere as bread at all.

Despite their variation, their forms really have just a few distinguishing characteristics: leavened or unleavened, cooked or baked, thin or thick. So it’s the nuances that scaffold their meaning: who builds the ovens or fires the griddle? Are the breads made at home or in the market? What access do the bakers have to fuel and how often? How is the process of baking passed between them? What grain raises the bread how high, and with what method of leavening? Who can afford to buy it? To make it? What happens when they can’t?

I collected these pictures and put them next to each other to see how similar a dissimilarity can appear. The breads flow one to the next, barely distinguishable from each other. Each has a name, a place, and a chain of people and plants that make it what it is, and unlike the others. Sometimes it’s hard to spot the difference just by looking at them.