

FOOD thought

with Dr. Tamsyn Murray

“There is not a thing that is more positive than bread”
- Fyodor Dostoevsky

Tamsyn Murray has a Masters degree in Rural Development and Agroecosystem Health and a PhD in Agriculture, specifically in ecosystem approaches to human health in the Amazon. She ran a small community supported farm for several years in Canada that fed 35 families during the summer months. She lives in Kerrie, near Woodend, where she farms sheep, cows, pigs and hens, grows most of the fruit and vegetables that feed her family and runs Josh's Rainbow Eggs, with much help from Josh.



My relationship with bread changed the day a friend gave me a sourdough loaf she had made that morning. I was most impressed. Although I was living an almost self-sufficient life, the one thing I had never done was bake my own bread (we'd had a bread maker a long time ago but that was cheating).

That weekend at dinner, my friend handed me a beautiful Chinese cup with a lid that contained a teaspoon of her leaven. She showed me how to feed it and gave me an instruction sheet, which contained several steps. The next morning I opened the lid of my cup and was thrilled to see the mixture had risen almost to the top and had a fruity aroma. That day I followed the instructions and made three beautiful spelt loaves. It was life changing! Each night I would feed my leaven and make bread the following day. After a while I stopped looking at the recipe. I discovered that there were some basic principles that were important, like temperature, wetness of the dough, controlling how long you leave the dough, how hard to mix it. It is a forgiving process. I felt part of the group of the many thousands of mothers around the world and over the many thousands of years past who had repeated this process to feed their families. Bread, we believe was “discovered” in Egypt more than 6000 years ago, when a forgotten bowl of porridge was found bubbling away.

When it was baked and grew even larger and tasted so much better than mash, it changed our relationship with grain.

Bread is so simple

Bread is so incredibly simple; flour, salt, water and my leaven, my own collection of microbes specific to my home. However there is nothing simple about the complex ecosystem of bacteria and yeast that makes the flour so nourishing. In fact I have read - ‘you could not survive on wheat flour, but you can survive on bread’. When we make bread, during the fermentation process, the acids produced by the microbes awaken the enzymes in the seed and they turn complex carbohydrates into easily digestible and tasty sugars and amino acids. Interestingly the microbes also partially break down the gluten, slow our absorption of the sugars in the flour and activate an enzyme that unlocks many of the minerals in the seed. It is a truly miraculous process whereby an inert mash grows and multiplies in size as well as in its ability to nourish us.

Modern bread making is however a completely different process. As we try to control and speed up this complex biological process, we substitute the whole ecosystem of microbes with a single organism - bakers' yeast.

Although this yeast is alive, it is a monoculture, and it does not survive well with bacteria, and because the fermentation process is so fast, all the positive changes that happen to the flour in the slow process of sourdough fermentation, do not take place.

The joyous art of bread making



Spectacularly nourishing

Modern bread making has deviated from the ancient process in another important way; the type of grain used. I use organic whole grains in my bread; a mix of spelt, rye and sometimes wheat. My husband bought me a stone grinder and so before I bake I grind the grain. I can actually smell the newly ground flour; flour from the store is odourless. For thousands of years people ground their grain just as I do, maintaining the integrity and nutrition of the entire seed. It was only in the late 19th century we figured out how to separate the bran and germ (embryo) from the endosperm. This was a huge boon for modern food processing as the pulverised endosperm or starch had a much longer shelf life than the more complex and unstable whole grain. This highly processed white flour made it easier to make bread faster. However there was a down side - our health.

When we moved from whole grain sourdough bread to highly processed white bread, we saw a sudden increase in nutrient deficiencies and chronic diseases. It is no wonder bread is so maligned today. However clearly not all breads are alike. Since my discovery of the joys of sourdough bread I believe I have found a food that is beautifully simple and spectacularly nourishing. I sincerely hope you may consider trying some yourself or better still baking it in your own kitchen.

My bread making routine

Here is my bread making routine (I have not given you specifics as I would like you first to see how simple this is rather than worrying about the details):

1. Before bed, feed leaven by adding rye flour to the leaven, mix well with warm water till a soft paste and cover. Leave in a spot that does not fluctuate in temperature.

2. In the morning grind grain into flour, add warm water until it is a wet dough, add leaven (make sure you FIRST remove a teaspoon and place in a cup and back in your perfect spot - my daughter once baked it all which was quite devastating!), add salt (careful to not let the salt touch the leaven as it kills it). Mix/knead for a while till you can feel the dough beginning to cling to itself and forming its own shape. Now you understand why they call it gluten, it definitely glues the dough together!

3. Cover and place in a warm spot - leave for three to four hours.

4. Remove dough and split into loaves and mould into shape and place in the bread tins. Leave again for one to two hours.

5. Place in a hot oven and cook for 45 to 55 minutes. It is ready when it sounds hollow upon tapping the top.

That is it! Nothing is exact, if it is colder the dough takes longer to percolate and if it hot, I add less water. Each time you make bread you learn almost intuitively what works best. I would be happy to share some of my leaven if you'd like to embark on your own bread-making journey.



(Photos were taken at Red Beard Bakery.)

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