

Baking From Scratch

This topic brought about several problems as to what title it should be given. When I was a child (born in 1932), there were plenty of ads in the media (there's a term that hadn't been invented yet), that featured "things our grandmother/grandfather used to do" that was supposed to elicit fond memories of our carefree youth. In my case, my grandparents' ages encompassed the years between 1868 through 1876, and therefore they were all brought up in conditions not much different from those of several generations previous. That is no longer the truth, primarily due to the tremendous advances that have been made in science, medicine, agriculture, transportation and industrialization.

Food is a central topic in much of our exposure to advertisements. Companies such as the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) for the longest time ran ads featuring a commercial product "just like grandmother made", or featured the picture of a wood-burning stove from which came the most beautiful roast or baked good. That approach does not work as well with a modern audience; their grandparents more than likely grew up during or after WWII, and the ad loses much of its relevance if you were to say "just like your great, great grandmother used to make", because modern grandmothers very likely bought Bisquick to make their pancakes.

Which brings us back to the difficulty with the title; I can't say "Baking in Grandmother's Time", because I want to discuss baking with stone-ground flour and (as much as possible) home-grown ingredients. I also don't feel comfortable referring to it as "Colonial Times", because that era ended in 1783, and I don't want to go that far back in time. What I will strive for is a period around the turn of the twentieth century in rural America. The purpose of underlining "rural" is that many farm wives did do much of their own food preparation from scratch, and I don't feel that urban women fell into that category. So what could we expect to see if we could look over the shoulder of our ancestor as she prepared to bake a few loaves of bread?

Let's begin with the flour: this was a commodity that could be purchased from a local mill or possibly a general store. Flour from the grist mill often was shipped in hogsheads, which were larger than barrels, and these hogsheads could hold up to 400 pounds of flour, not the type of packaging the average consumer wanted to deal with. Hogsheads of flour (it could be made from wheat, rye, millet, oats or corn) were shipped to general stores, or grain companies (Leonard's, Manchester's, Hawley's) where it would supply the consumers, who most likely would have a wooden barrel in the pantry having a capacity of perhaps 100 pounds of flour. Wheat flour was probably the most used, but even here the baker (Grandmother) used more than one type; there was winter wheat, high in gluten, and summer wheat, more commonly used in pastries. Let me inject here that we never heard one word about people who had to avoid eating baked goods with gluten, or which had to be dairy-free, or lactose-free. I honestly don't know why this should be, but it certainly was different a few decades back. I remember my mother, born in 1901, and who used a wood-burning stove until 1947, when electricity finally came to the northern reaches of Colebrook, making an annual (or was it semi-annual?) trip to Southern

Vermont to lay in a supply of high-content gluten flour as well as a whole wheel of Vermont Cheddar cheese. The flour went into the flour barrel, the wheel of cheese was cut into 12 sections, each of which was liberally smeared with fresh butter, then wrapped in heavy paper. The combination of the cheese and butter allowed the butter to remain sweet for at least one year, and the cheese remained as fresh as if it had been encased in wax.

Bread Day was the cause of more mouth-watering than any other product that came from the oven; the whole house took on the best aroma, and before the loaves were allowed to cool, one would be “striped”, meaning that the skin, consisting of all six sides was removed, lathered with fresh butter and consumed. That presented the cook with a small problem; what to do with the center of the loaf; it might end up in bread pudding, or stuffing for a bird, or it could be sliced and toasted (on top of the cast iron cook stove); none of these alternatives however, came close to equaling the enjoyment derived from partaking of the whole family (and more often than not a few neighbors) in consuming the buttered crusts of that striped loaf.

A word about the Vermont cheese: sometimes my mother would cut thin strips of this cheese and insert them into the rising loaves, which, when they were baked, produced a most enjoyable product.

At an earlier time than that of my mother, housewives sometimes made their own yeast. This might begin with securing some hops, a vine not unlike virgin’s bower, which still can be found along old stone walls, but used to be found locally. About four cups of hops blossoms, along with about six quarts of water was boiled until the water looked like tea. While this was happening, potatoes would be peeled and grated into a gallon or so of water. Then a cupful of salt was added to the potato mixture and stirred constantly until it looked like wallpaper paste. To this was added two cups of the “hop tea”.

It was then cooled; sometimes a little sugar was added to hasten the fermenting process after a cupful of old yeast had been put in the mixture, and in a short while if kept at room temperature, the new yeast would rise, threatening to overflow the container it was being held in. After agitating this mixture to reduce the volume, it was put into gallon jugs, tightly capped, and set in a cool place to be used in the next baking undertaking.

Dough for the bread was started by taking three cups of yeast into a large bowl along with several cups of warm water and enough flour to prevent the dough from sticking to the “kneading board”. (In my mother’s case, it was on a slab of marble, once a counter top, that was removed from its usual resting place in the corner and placed on the kitchen table).

My mother, who I cannot remember ever raising her voice, used to joke that it was because she was able to get rid of her frustrations by forcefully kneading and alternately punching the bread dough. She thought that this would be a better and more peaceful world if more people learned the secrets of making bread.

Baking temperature was critical, and this was done by regulating the amount and type of wood used during the baking process; black locust gave the highest temperature, red maple would cause the temperature to drop.

I wonder what my mother would say if she could see what a loaf of bread sells for today!