



**A little leaven
leaveneth
the whole loaf**

BY Dasty Dowse

Photographs by Tessa Barpee

There is no basis for believing in ancestral memories; we can inherit instincts, but never memories. And yet I know they are real. Our people once were hunters. When we detect the ominous smell and feel of winter building just over the northern horizon, we hunt. There are the tangible rewards of fresh game, but there is more than that at stake. We are compelled. And words fail when we try to explain the reasons. It is our ancestral memories at work, and they run deep, coming from a time before we had words to write down our history.

But we are not hunter-gatherers anymore. At some point along the way we became "civilized." And the memories of that sea change reside in that same deep well. When we go off to deer camp, we usually stop at a Mom and Pop and stock up on two items our nomadic ancestors did not have, Bread and Beer. Deer camp without them? Not a pleasant prospect. You can't have those two bare bones essentials without agriculture, and you can't have agriculture without civilization. You can make a strong case that the discovered need for these two staples created the world as we know it.

We cannot know for sure how bread and beer were invented. But we can make some pretty shrewd guesses. And maybe it won't hurt to consult that (presumably nonexistent) ancestral memory. We know that there were wild grains that our ancestors gathered and ate to supplement their hunting and fishing. There are still tribal societies that do this today. Genome sequencing of wild and domestic grain plants now helps show where our modern grains came from and how they were bred. Importantly, you couldn't just eat these seeds as is, you needed to cook them up into a porridge. If you want to keep the cooked porridge for any length of time, you can dry thin patties of the doughy mass on a rock heated by your wood campfire. Now you have unleavened bread with texture and taste far superior to the gluey porridge. Just like that the Great Wheel turned.

People were also brewing alcoholic beverages in those halcyon days, using fruits, grain mashes, and honey. When you do this, you get a wild culture of yeast and bacteria that can be kept alive from batch to batch. This is called barm and if you add it to your porridge, or even let a batch of porridge sit out for a while, it ferments just like the beer. Bake this airy dough, and you have a true leavened bread, the first sourdough, and it is lighter and tastier than the flat cake. If you want all this good stuff, bread and beer, all the time (and who wouldn't?) you gather together permanently in places where you can plant and grow grains and other tasty things, and we call it a village.

Bread is deeply engraved in our memories of where we came from as a people. Over the millennia, it has become sacred: the Communion Wafer, Passover Matzo, offerings in the tombs of the pharaohs. Ghandi once said: "There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread." The flow of the seasons and our deep ties to our crops are told in the story of Demeter, whose daughter Persephone was carried off to Hades. She was rescued, but must return to the underworld for several months of the year, and Demeter's mourning brings winter.

But something very wrong has come upon us. As there are those who decry hunting, so there are those who tell us to stop eating bread. Bah! We have been eating bread since the dawn of civilization. Over six thousand years! We have been overweight as a nation for the last twenty or so. Blame what you will, but leave bread out of it. And that is only one facet of the Dark Force that would expunge the wisdom of all those millennia. The other is that our bread in the Good Ole You Ess of Ay has been deteriorating in quality since the turn of the twentieth century. It is but a ghost of its once mighty presence. Julia Child tells us "How can a nation be called great when its bread tastes like Kleenex?"

I grew up in one of the oldest cities in the U.S., Albany, New York (we would say THE



The Kneading Conference features displays and workshops to help farmers learn more about different wheat varieties, including these heritage varieties brought by Eli Rugosa, of Organic Wheat.



Presenter Dusty Dowse helped bake over 100 pizzas for the pizza lunch -- each pizza takes only about two minutes in the 900 degree oven!

oldest, thanks). And my family had BREAD! The real stuff. There were ethnic bakeries all over the city, and we got Italian bread that had real crust, not the tarted up foam sponges with sprayed-on dye to simulate crust that we get in the supermarkets. The German and Austrian bakeries put out rich ryes and black pumpernickels that would really test the mettle of your jaw muscles. Indian restaurants made fresh naan and chapattis to slake the fires of their vindaloos. Real bagels were boiled in lye solution before baking.

"If it's not boiled, it's not a bagel!" Jewish bakeries also made onion board, something like a thin pizza laden with onions and olive oil, along with bialys. My stepfather was Armenian, and we

usually had Middle Eastern flatbread with meals at home, along with lamajoun, an Armenian pizza with lamb and unique spices and herbs. Add cheeses that were so sharp they would take the enamel off your teeth and you have Real Food. Provolone should clear your sinuses, not double for the little rubber mats you use to block the drains in bathtubs.

When we moved to Maine many years back, we checked to see if there was a bakery in the town near where we were buying our farm. Sure enough there was. It had a wide variety of loaves in the window, all tasty looking from the street on a bitter January day. Unfortunately, we did not go in, having other pressing matters to attend to.

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Above: Students get their hands in the dough alongside presenters in a workshop on whole wheat pastries; At right: Caterer Billi Barker tops a pizza with fresh, local ingredients before it goes into the wood-fired oven.

That was a big mistake. The quality of the bread, or lack thereof, would not have made us change our plans, but it was information we ought to have had. After we were moved in, we stopped in to buy bread. And found that everything in the bakery tasted like hamburger buns. Everything. French baguettes, German rye, Kaiser rolls. Yup, all hamburger buns. Now you may like hamburger rolls. I like them myself when they are wrapped around a sizzling hamburger done over charcoal. But I have had baguettes in Paris, and what they labeled "French Bread" was NOT from the same galaxy. In the strictest sense, it may not even have been bread at all. The mystical chain to the first baker who tossed a bubbly mass of sourdough onto a fire-heated rock was broken.

So what to do? My answer was to learn to bake to ensure a supply of this most crucial, most REAL, of all foods. I have been baking since the mid sixties and I keep refining my skills and resources. I

have a two-ton wood-fired masonry oven. Its design goes back to before Roman times. This is clearly more than a hobby. And there are others like me who take bread seri-



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Participants at the Kneading Conference make demonstration clay "beehive" ovens.

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ously and go those extra few million miles. But I'll stipulate that this is not the answer for everyone. You can buy a LOT of hamburger buns for what we have sunk into THAT puppy! One could even go to Munich once in a while for some pickled herring with sour cream on Bavarian rye. Add a heated building around the oven and, well, you get the picture. How could I NOT believe in ancestral memory? But do not despair if you want real bread and do not want to be accused of going off your medication. Like an avenging Host, the Artisan bakers of Maine are back, and the link to those ancient times, like the shattered Sword of Siegfried, is reformed. Real Bread is back!

The good news does not stop with bread. Small-scale Maine farmers are working to return grain production to the state. Once all food was local. It's time for it to be local again. The "locavore" movement has gained momentum globally. The reasoning is a desire to save energy in the transport of food, and this is practical and sensible. But perhaps it is one more manifestation of Ancestral Memory seeping out of the Paleolithic shadows.

Artisan bakers, farmers, millers and masons are a dedicated lot. This is not an easy life. But when it comes to putting Real Bread on Maine tables, they are messianic in their zeal. You have to love the work. It is tough to define what the term "artisan baker" means, but one might start by saying it requires that there be hand work. Maybe the whole hundred pound batch of ciabatta dough is not mixed by hand, but at some point or another, the dough is handled, shaped and put in the oven by someone who really cares about what has happened to it along the way. The old-time methods are returning, like long pre-fermentations that draw out the full flavor of the grain, sourdough leavening to add bacterial fermentation products to those of the wild yeasts for extraordinary depth and intensity. Using less refined or whole-grain flours keeps more of the flavor and healthful goodness that would be sifted and bleached out by large



Above: Presenter Jack Lazor of Butterworks Farm in Vermont is an expert on threshing wheat using old tools and methods. Small Maine farms are returning to these techniques. Below left: A clay oven gets a firing to harden it for use.



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These tasty bagels are just some of the workshop "by-products" that are sampled and enjoyed by conference participants all day.



commercial bakeries.

One huge factor is the return by many artisans to the older styles of oven. No stainless steel oil-burning monsters with moving shelving for these new/old craftspeople. Remember the first bakers who cooked their loaves on hot rocks? Well, that is part of our ancestral magic too. Bread that bakes sitting right on stone turns the last corner to becoming Real Bread.

Something mysterious lives in the walls of a wood-fired masonry oven that can only be called Soul. The crust crackles as it cools, the crumb has big irregular holes and is twisted and gnarly. You are tasting something that was already ancient beyond reckoning when Hammurabi wrote his code. These ovens are old friends from when the world was young, returned to us at last.

The artisan bakers, grain farmers and oven builders are the driving force behind this remarkable transformation. Those who share in this collective vision have organized to act as the seed around which all these efforts can crystallize. Starting as an outgrowth of the nonprofit Heart of Maine, Resource Conservation and Development in Skowhegan, a group is assisting commercial and serious home bakers, farmers who want to revive grain production, masons and equipment suppliers to unite in the cause of Real

Bread and Local Food. This group, now called Bakers, Artisans and Growers (B.A.G.), started and runs the Kneading Conference, an annual event in Skowhegan, that brings world experts in all aspects of Real Bread production together for two days of seminars and hands-on instruction. Classes include all aspects of baking, grain growing, seed exchange and masonry oven use. Students can even learn to make inexpensive wood-fired clay ovens such as were typical in Atlantic Canada for many years. This year it occurs on the last two days of July (<http://www.heartofmaine.org/kneading/>).

Building on the success of this wonderful series of seminars, B.A.G. is hosting a free Artisan Bread Fair and Trade show, on August 1st, right after the Kneading Conference, in which breads of all kinds, some of which will be baked in masonry ovens on site as visitors watch, will be the center of attention. There will be demonstrations, sellers of equipment for the professional and amateur, a grain seed exchange, agricultural equipment for the small farmer, books, art, live music and all manner of food to go with the bread, hot from the hearth. Demeter and Persephone tell me they plan on attending.

On page opposite: A commercial copper-clad Le Panyol masonry oven on a trailer.