

Feel the Need to Knead

When life is unsettled with unexpected twists and turns, sometimes I feel the need to knead. Pushing down on the soft dough with both hands, turning it when pulling back, then folding it over. The repetitive rhythmic push-turn-fold, push-turn-fold, push-turn-fold is soothing, even meditative. To sense when the shaggy mass of water, yeast, and flour is hydrating, transitioning to slightly sticky to smooth, pliable solid that feels “warm, springy, and alive,” requires focus, patience, and awareness: being fully present.

Of course there are the important but, by comparison, pedestrian reasons to knead: distributing the water through the flour that activates and warms two proteins – gliadin and glutenin – to combine and create gluten creating an elastic dough and spreading the yeast that will create carbon dioxide bubbles throughout to create a consistent “crumb” (what bakers call the interior of bread; the exterior being “crust”). It is gluten that traps those bubbles, causing the dough to rise or “proof” before being cast into the fiery oven.

Although there are other techniques that will accomplish these same tasks -stretch and fold, electric mixer, or (mon dieu!) no kneading – hand kneading provides a full body and sensory experience that – for about 10 minutes – rolls, presses, and turns cares away.

Feeling the need to knead, I turned to my 50-year-old The Complete Book of Breads by Bernard Clayton, Jr, the equivalent of the Joy of Cooking for breads. But John Derry of Meadow Bread enlightened me to a different perspective. At the program “From Grain to Loaf” sponsored by the Mid-Atlantic Grain Alliance and the Fairfax County Park Authority at Colvin Run, Derry explained that producing truly good, distinctive bread requires attention to sourcing and milling of the wheat as well as baking. Derry sources locally, grinds his own grains, and bakes in a wood-fired stove. The bread he offered was truly exceptional.

One of Derry’s mentors is Tara Jensen who believes that that grain should be considered fresh produce, not a pantry staple. Agreed. We refrigerate our ground products at the mill. In her book Flour Power Jensen explains that:

Baking bread with well-made flour offers us a chance to express and taste terroir: the unique flavor that comes from a specific blend of climate, growing methods, and preparation. Just as winemakers talk about the soil and topography a specific grape variety was grown in, so too can we, as bakers, enjoy grains and flour with interesting characteristics and qualities.



Whoa! Radical! Saying cheers when “clinking” slices of baguette?? Sounds a bit off. I can taste the difference between wine made from chardonnay and cabernet grapes (ok, unfair: the former is white, the latter red). Or a gamay and cabernet franc. So many grape varieties and tastes. But the range of tastes of breads is somewhat limited. Or so I thought.

Comparisons between wine and bread tasting can be overdone. But I was surprised to learn that some think the best taste of a bread is three days after it has been baked. Supplementing “No wine before its time,” we could say “No slice before its thrice?!”

In Flour is Flavour Dawn Woodward believes that flour is more than flavor but food and nourishment: “Its aroma, colour, taste, and texture are visual and sensory expressions of how we treat the soil, our respect for the environment, and for each other.” Her small book is devoted to making full-flavored savory and sweet baked goods completely from whole grain flours.

This new generation of bakers is pushing the boundaries, seeking to extract the fullest flavor from flours, heeding veteran Peter Reinhart’s, author of the essential The Bread Baker’s Apprentice, admonishment that the baker’s task is to “evoke the full potential of flavor from the wheat.”

Feeling the need to knead and learning a few new tricks and bread formulas (not recipes, mind you) in the process, baking will be the focus for this last year of this President’s grindstone. After all, food is one reason I volunteer at Colvin Run – the other reasons being history, technology and nature.

Not too adventurous at the outset, I made crackers. After a while, the grocery store offerings seem uninspiring. Not so Woodward’s spelt and barely red wine crackers. Spelt and barley flours were new to me – because I have been living under a rock for 10,000 years when they were first domesticated. Truly ancient grains, they have a “nutty” flavor and were used in Europe for baking breads and making liquid breads, aka, beer.



Spelt has similar characteristics as wheat, but barley is a nutritional powerhouse with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and four times the fiber but fewer calories than all-purpose flour. Roman Gladiators munched on barley bread to gain strength and bulk earning them the nickname “eaters of barley” (*hordearii*). In the New World barley didn’t thrive. Spelt’s tough and thick tusk makes it

difficult to thresh and yields less per acre than wheat. Both fell out of favor but are making comebacks as healthy alternatives and to offer different flour flavors.

Woodward offers variations of her cracker: one with a blend of cinnamon and cloves, the other rosemary and salt. Mix the flours and dry ingredients in one bowl using a nifty digital scale that can be reset to zero after adding an ingredient – no math required when adding the next ingredient. Liquids – red wine, water olive oil and honey in another bowl. Blend both together and knead. Relaxing. Calming. Needing. Kneading.



Letting the dough “rest” is another way of allowing the flour to fully absorb the moisture. After 20 minutes I cut the ball of dough into eight pieces, flattened them and rolled them thin – and as I got more accustomed to the process – rolled them thinner, cutting them into ribbons. Transferring to a baking sheet and pricking them with a fork to prevent them from bubbling up. Popped into a 375-degree oven and 15 minutes later, crackers!



Then the true test: tasting. Get out of the way saltines! These had flavor and a mild crunch. Nutty, barley goodness. Served with my signature artichoke tapenade, they were suitable for company – which is the true test (and they ate more than one, so the guests were beyond being polite).



Emboldened and still wanting to keep the world at bay, using rye and bread flour in the pantry, I whipped up a batch of New York Style Rye Crackers. They were fine with hints of garlic and caraway – but by comparison a bit on the bland side compared to the barley crackers.

New flours. New flavors. And satisfying the need to knead: push-turn-fold; push-turn-fold; push-turn-fold....

