

Breadmakers and their Breads

Breadmakers come all sizes and all ages. My brother is a burly man in his mid-forties; Nell is ninety and fragile. Both are expert home bakers. As a breed, breadmakers are as varied and various as the loaves they bake. And the breads are a reflection of the bakers - who they are, where and how they live.

My brother lives in a town so small that the United Parcel Service address is simply: The Mobil Station, U.S. Highway 12. From the deck of his A frame house, Hugh can see the snow-covered peak of Mt. Rainier. An expatriot Nutmegger, he retired from the Air Force to the Cascade Mountains where he and his Idaho-born wife and their young daughter live a rugged outdoor life.

It's easier to imagine Hugh at the wheel of a pickup truck than at the stove. He's a hunter of game, a fisherman, athlete and skier. But he is also a baker of bread.

As a breadmaker, he favors sour doughs and cherishes a starter that he claims is 140 years old. His recipes bristle with macho instructions about "knocking down the dough", "dumping" it out and kneading it until "tough and springy."

He mixes the dough in a glazed earthenware crock with a lid. Using a stout knife with the sharp tip broken off and filed smooth, he vigorously stirs the liquids into the dry ingredients, adding flour until the blade of the knife makes a clean cut through the soft dough. The crock is then covered and the dough allowed to rise in a warm place.

When my brother first described his method, I thought the crock rather an affectation, but in fact, it's an excellent idea.

Earthenware holds heat well, the lid protects the dough from drafts and the straight sides of the cylinder make it particularly easy to judge how much the dough has risen.

The broken knife isn't a bad idea either! While a rigid plastic bowl scraper serves the same purpose, it lacks the rustic charm of the broken knife! Either utensil is an improvement over the conventional wooden spoon. Stirring heavy dough with a spoon soon becomes uphill work.

Hugh learned breadmaking from his father-in-law who came from a family of Idaho shepherders. Out on the range, bread dough was made in camp and stirred with whatever implement came to hand. There were no specialized pots and pans, and a crock served as combined mixing bowl, dough box and storage container. Bread was baked in the same cast iron pot used for soups and stews.

My brother still bakes his sour dough in a cast iron dutch oven. The bread itself is fine textured with a crisp golden crust but it's method of preparation has an aura of the Wild West about it - wide open spaces and starry nights on the range; coyotes and campfires and male camaraderie.

If Hugh with his sinewy masculine attitude is at one end of the breadmaking spectrum, Nell Dorr is at the other. Hers is an intensely feminine approach. To me, she is the archetypal bread-maker - a nourisher, a giver, a dispenser of life and warmth and affection. Nell is mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. She's a photographer and an interpreter of lives.

As a child growing up in Ohio, she was given a pinhole camera by her photographer father. From that moment on, a camera was her constant companion. Over the years, she recorded everything that

appealed to her. And what appealed most was natural beauty in the face of a friend, the shape of a flower, the curve of a tree trunk.

But it was for her photographs of mothers and children that she eventually became best known. The pictures in her book Mother and Child are not just of motherhood, they are about a unique relationship. The deep unconscious intimacy that flows between a mother and her child is revealed in gestures and expressions - a baby's hand resting on its mother's bare neck; the rapt concentration of a young woman buttoning up her daughter's dress.

Nell is an artist who thinks of women as "the yeast of life without which all the dough in the world would not rise." She thinks of herself as a baker and of her work as "a simple loaf." In Nell, the woman, the artist and the breadmaker are indivisible. It seems only logical to find bread rising in her kitchen.

Nell's house, appropriately named the Villa Serena, lies in a deep fold of Connecticut hills that run north to join the Berkshire Mountains. From every window, there is a different perspective of this peaceful little valley. The livingroom overlooks a broad meadow, once a golf course, stretching away to a stream edged with willows and pines.

The kitchen window frames a gentle secluded view of apple trees sheltered by a high fieldstone wall. The wall becomes part of the house foundations and the kitchen built into a hillside is protected by the earth itself. The room is comfortable winter and summer.

It is a simple kitchen with an old round table in the middle low enough for a small woman to work at easily. In contrast to my brother's aggressive handling of bread dough, Nell's touch is delicate but firm. Her fingers are very slender and rather arthritic now,

but they fold and push almost as nimbly as ever.

She makes breads that are full of wonderful and surprising flavors and ingredients - herbs and spices; fruit, nuts and seeds. She never uses a recipe. And when asked how she makes a certain kind, she laughs and shakes her head. She makes a basic dough, then experiments. "Try anything!" she advises. "Experiment! Never stop experimenting!"

I have watched her work and tried to commit to memory her style and technique. But even Nell's granddaughter - a graduate of The Culinary Institute and herself a gifted professional cook - can not copy precisely her grandmother's breads. X

The kind I love most has anise seed and caraway in it. You can smell this haunting combination as soon as the loaves go in the oven. The aroma is one I've never encountered anywhere else and it permeates Nell's house. Even when she isn't baking, the house has a lingering spicy fragrance that mingles with the scent of a wood fire.

Nell's breadmaking methods are old-fashioned and unhurried. Instead of cooking whole grains over direct heat, she lets them soak overnight before cooking them slowly in the top of a double boiler. She never uses the rapid-mix method of combining the dry ingredients and adding hot liquid to speed up fermentation. She always uses ingredients at body temperature and waits patiently for nature to take its course.

She gives the dough not one but two periods of leisurely rising in a large bowl with a fitted cover. Then, she shapes the loaves and once again allows them to rise in their own good time.

The loaves themselves are unique in design. Two rounds of dough nestle in each pan. The resulting loaf has twin mounds that

can be easily pulled apart in the middle after baking. These paired loaves are unusually attractive and remind me of the English "cottage" loaf. A cottage loaf is made from two balls of dough, one large and one small. The smaller rests on top of the larger and they are baked together.

The pans Nell uses for bread are old and dark with the appealing look of long use. And she mixes dough in an antique metal container that has served the same purpose for a hundred years. Using only these simple utensils, she performs a ritual that has been carried out in almost the same way for centuries. But she does make one concession to the 20th century - an up-to-the-minute electric range in the kitchen and in the cellar, an additional electric oven.

Until recently, Nell baked large quantities of bread every week supplying not only her own household but friends as well. A familiar double loaf is born away with reverence! It is the best bread I've ever eaten!

In age, Leslie Randall is mid-way between Nell and my brother. She is a painter. More artist than earth mother, her grown children have long since dispersed and she lives alone - if anyone who shares a house with two large shepherd dogs can be said to live alone - and she likes it.

Born in Montreal of an American father and a fiercely Canadian mother, Leslie came to the United States when she was five, but returned to Canada for three character-testing years at a Presbyterian boarding school.

Art school in New York and a year in Paris followed. Then, she settled down to study with George Luks. Luks belonged to a group of painters who faithfully depicted the darker side of city life and earned the title, The Ash Can School of painting.

He was "an inspiring teacher" but one who expected students

to emulate his style. In the end, Leslie learned most by painting alone, going through various stages and different mediums. Her mature style is characterized by the exclusive use of a pallet knife instead of a brush.

Her work, her breadmaking and Leslie herself seem very much of a piece - independent, economical and durable. She works in a spartan, light-filled studio painting on masonite rather than canvas. The pigment is laid on with clean, no-nonsense strokes giving her pictures their strength and individuality.

Her subjects vary - animals rendered quickly and with great character; still lifes of weeds and field flowers and the New England landscape boldly simplified.

The view from Leslie's kitchen window might be one of her own paintings. Ranks of straight tree trunks recede into the distance. In the foreground, a brook flows past boulders left behind when the glacier retreated from Connecticut. The kitchen is as functional as the studio. It's a work space with glass containers of flour and other staples lining the counters ready for use.

Leslie, like Nell, is a frequent and imaginative baker, but there the similarity ends. Much of Nell's pleasure in breadmaking derives from working in harmony with the growing yeast plant. Leslie admits a certain impatience with yeast. Her chief enjoyment is in the end result - the hearty loaf to slice for breakfast, give as a present or put away in the freezer.

The breads she likes best are peasant breads that are quickly made, full of flavor and rather heavy textured. There is something basic and soul-satisfying about these sturdy loaves. I have two favorites; one a very dark, crumbly bran loaf with raisins - spread with cream cheese, it is delectable! - and a wholewheat soda bread

full of caraway seeds.

Soda breads only take a few minutes to mix and the recipes Leslie has given me have delightfully casual instructions about "tossing in" ingredients. She mixes these very sticky doughs with a fork and shapes the dough into rough balls with well-floured hands. The round loaves bear a cross cut in the top. The cross is part age-old decorative symbol of the sun, part expediency - soda breads tend to crack during baking.

In Leslie, breadmaker and artist are perfectly compatible. Her studio, kitchen and living space are all under the same roof and she moves comfortably from one area of her life to another. Her time is her own and her method of breadmaking is relaxed and easy-going.

Elizabeth is a different kind of breadmaker and artist. She lives an often hectically-paced life divided between two worlds. There is the world of her actor husband, Pirie MacDonald, which includes a New York apartment and a house in Connecticut complete with dog, cat, guests and friends.

Then, there is the world of her studio, separated from the house by a hundred yards and a steep bank. But it might as well be on another planet! Indeed, much of the work that is done there has an air of other worldliness about it.

To describe Elizabeth MacDonald as a professional potter misses the point. Although she makes beautiful utilitarian objects which she sells to craft shops and galleries, her real interest lies in clay as a hybrid art form containing elements of both painting and sculpture. Her pieces range from almost two dimensional mosaics of porcelain tile to sculptural habitats of clay in which tiny, mysterious scenes are viewed through a crevice or an opening like a minute proscenium arch.

It is not surprising to learn that Elizabeth, a native of Massachusetts, began her working life in the theatre. She and her husband met as struggling young actors. After they were married, both performed with The Seattle Repertory Theatre in Washington, but Elizabeth was already becoming more interested in clay and soon abandoned the stage for the studio.

In her work, she practices Nell's advice to the breadmaker about experimenting. She never stops experimenting. She's always finding new forms and seeking new directions. Her style is constantly changing but always consistent in its eager exploration of secret places.

It is significant that Elizabeth's studio is on one level and her house on another. Her life, too, is conducted on two levels - the aesthetic and the practical. Breadmaking forges a link between them. In the studio, she makes bread pans and in the kitchen, she makes bread.

The pans are made of red clay and look like roofing tiles from an Italian hill town. They come in pairs or singly. The loaves they make are about 16 inches long and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. The bread is a French-style wholewheat with the wonderful thick, crisp crust of bread baked on a hearth stone.

Characteristically, Elizabeth began baking as an adjunct to firing a kiln. A gas kiln has to be regulated by feel and eye and checked every half hour. This constant vigil made other studio work impossible but dovetailed conveniently with breadmaking.

Although the gas kiln has been replaced by an electric one, Elizabeth still plies the steep path between house and studio to make bread. She has the perfect hands for a breadmaker - small, square and very strong. After years of handling heavy clay, dough

seems light work! She mixes large batches and bakes eight loaves at a time to tide her over long absences from the kitchen.

Elizabeth makes bread to feel "connected" and because she likes the parallel between "wedging" clay to remove the air and kneading bread to develop the gluten. Leslie says she makes bread because "It's so easy" and because she appreciates good quality and flavor at such a low price - twenty cents a loaf by her reckoning!

But making bread fulfills other needs that have little to do with hunger and less to do with economy. In an unstable world, breadmaking provides a thread of continuity. However different their individual styles Hugh, Nell, Leslie and Elizabeth are part of the same ancient but on-going tradition.

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