

RISE AND SHINE

Angela Clutton on how bread, which manages to be both wildly diverse and completely universal, is able to create an emotional resonance like no other foodstuff

Image: Regula Ysewijn

“Serve with chunks of bread.” These are the words that most of my very favourite recipes end with. It is an instruction that assures a meal of relaxed conviviality. All the more so if the bread is there to mop up the juices of the dish, where many flavours lie and the waste of which would be pretty much unforgivable. Claudia Roden says that her father could not *“truly savour sauces or juices, or anything in fact, without a piece of bread”*, and I am with him.

A baguette is my bread of choice for that task. Roughly torn and piled up on the side for everyone to help themselves to. Whether partnering a fish broth or an oxtail stew, this is really not a time for elegant bread. That would feel all wrong somehow.

Often, our choices of bread are all about feelings. Flavour too, yes, of course. But the emotional resonance of bread is like little else. Take the incomparable comfort of a slice of toast served up as a simple act of kindness or sustenance—spread with jam, or Marmite if you must, or the salty butter that is my preference, ideally while the toast is still so hot that the butter soaks deep, deep into the crumb. If tired or ill or just plain hungry there is nothing to beat it.

The simplest loaves often make for the very best toast. Yeasted or sourdough, baked in a tin or freeform, all that matters is that they slice well and taste good. These are also the kinds of loaves well within the capabilities of a home baker—even if Julia Child and Elizabeth David each slightly dauntingly take over a dozen pages to tell us how to bake the plainest of French loaves in their cookbooks. They are your—our—chance to fill the home with the smell of freshly baked bread that is so warming of spirit; to feel the immense satisfaction of kneading and knocking-back a loaf.



Where to buy

Bread
Bread Ahead
Bakery
Karaway Bakery
Olivier's Bakery
The Flour Station

What could be lovelier than that? Not much. But my own breads don't always turn out so well. Sometimes I worry that the bread can somehow sense my mood—whenever I'm feeling out of sorts, that somehow translates itself to the loaf, which, like me, becomes a sad reflection of itself. This makes me wonder whether all professional bakers are at heart happy, contented souls. Certainly, I am more than willing to leave the bread-making to craftsmen bakers whose hard-won skills enable them to embrace all kinds of different loaves, each of them evoking different feelings in us as we choose which to buy and eat when.

Behind such differences lies the universality of bread. Communities around the world have always adapted their own styles to whatever fits their particular culture of farming and feeding. It is a theme evocatively explored by Elisabeth Luard in her classic mid-1980s cookbook, *The Rich Tradition of European Peasant Cookery*. She is yet another iconic food writer who has been compelled to put into words how she feels about bread, and for her it is important precisely because it offers such a connection across societies. As she writes about a tradition of Sicilian breads where the loaves are 'put to bed' by being covered with shawls and blankets, who among us doesn't at that description yearn to do as she tells us the locals do, and pile into the hot bread not with butter but with olive oil, salt, pepper and grated cheese?

Happily, many international heritage breads remain just as popular today as they ever were and carry with them still the resonances of their origins. Rye breads, for example, have a distinctive flavour and texture that speaks of the hardy rye cereal grain from which they are made. The low

gluten content of the rye makes these breads harder for the baker to work and results in denser textures that suit the cooking of the regions they are associated with, such as Scandinavia and parts of Russia or Germany, where more delicate wheat grain doesn't survive well. When you think about what to serve with the intensity of pickles and smoked fish, or with hearty soups, the depth and weight of a slice of rye starts to feel straight away like just the right thing.

Sometimes what you want is a flatbread that can be wrapped around your food as you eat, or used to scoop up meat, vegetables or pulses cooked in a delicious sauce, thereby bringing you tangibly closer to the pleasure of food. It isn't cold metal but warm bread and your hands that deliver the food to your mouth. Depending on what you are eating—and how you are feeling—your choice of flatbread could be one of so many international options. Maybe an Indian naan, a Georgian khachapuri, an Italian focaccia, or its close cousin the French fougasse, which has more rustic elegance to it than many of the breads I have mentioned so far.

Mention of French breads takes me back again to the classic baguette with which I began. It is one style of bread you couldn't easily bake at home even if you wanted to—it is simply too long for domestic ovens. That could be what makes it such a special delight to see crusty baguettes piled up on a baker's counter. They stir memories for me of summer holidays in France, where the proliferation of independent bakers and roadside baguette-vending machines are sure signs of a country that takes its relationship with bread very seriously.

What a joy it is—as I write that last sentence—to be able to go on to say that in Britain there has been a tangible shift for the good in how we feel about bread. There is growing respect here for 'proper' craftsmen bakers alongside growing understanding of the failings in the flavour and nutritional value of processed breads, and then the pleasures of well-made bread. We are again embracing breads that age rather than just go off.

Okay, yes, they all go off eventually, but before they do so, the bread undertakes a journey of aging that offers even the most moderately-resourceful of cooks the chance to keep on enjoying every last crumb and not waste any of its fabulousness—revived by oil, water and vinegar in a panzanella salad, sunk deep into custard for a bread and butter pudding, or simply whizzed up into breadcrumb crumbs.

We are rediscovering, too, our own British heritage loaf styles. My favourite of those is the cottage loaf. Imagine two round loaves baked on top of each other, with the top one smaller than the bottom, and you are on the right lines. It can't really be easily sliced or toasted—it's another bread for satisfyingly ripping and dunking—but whenever I see one I can't help smiling. And there is much to be said for any bread that makes you feel happy.

