
WHO KNEADS BREAD ANYWAY?

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It happens like clockwork. Each year some new or rediscovered gastronomic trend captures the imaginations of cooks, noncooks and columnists alike.

Often it is of questionable use. *Manifold Destiny*, or the practice of cooking an entire meal on the engine of one's car, comes to mind—butter-braised leeks and rock shrimp by Goleta; pear-stuffed pork loin, moist and succulent as San Luis Obispo comes into sight (toxic fumes and battery acid be damned). Then there was *Beer Can Chicken* (surprisingly moist but best not to dwell on the clinical symptomology of lead-based paint poisoning). Don't forget *brine-mania*, which works brilliantly on poultry but sometimes leads to a compulsion to salt brine everything in sight. And finally my old favorite, *Scanner Crepes*, whereby egg batter is poured directly onto a flatbed scanner set at 1200 dpi. (OK, you got me—I made that last one up.)

Anyway, while I don't pretend to be any kind of culinary bellwether I do take note when, over a relatively short period of time, a bunch of people ask whether I've heard of some

particular new thing in the food world. In this case I'm referring to Jim Lahey's "no-knead" French bread lauded by Mark Bittman in his *New York Times* food column as the best thing since, well ... you know what.

For those who missed it, Lahey, owner of Manhattan's Sullivan Street Bakery, lured Bittman to his shop with the promise of an authentic thick-crust, open-crumbed, country *boule* equal to anything produced by his own bakery. Oh yeah, the method is so insanely technique-free it requires zero kneading and, according to Lahey, can be mixed and formed by any 4-year-old with the will to get a little flour on his hands (and what self-respecting 4-year-old doesn't have that?) The recipe calls for a fraction of the yeast found in most bread recipes, a greater proportion of water and an excruciatingly long rise of up to 24 hours. I looked up Bittman's original piece (*NYT*, Nov. 8, 2006) and found a quote from food science guru Harold McGee, who explained: "It makes sense. The long, slow rise does over hours what intensive kneading does in minutes: It brings the gluten molecules into side-by-side alignment to maximize their opportunity to bind to each other and produce a strong, elastic network. The wetness of the dough is an important piece of this because the gluten molecules are more mobile in a high proportion of water, and so can move into alignment easier and faster than if the dough was stiff."

All right, I know this is the kind of mind-numbing natter that turns people away from the science of baking, but keep in mind that you don't have to grasp the principle behind alternating current to successfully use a light switch. More importantly, if Harold says it has merit then that's enough for me. His culinary science masterpiece, *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* (Scribner, 1984), is hands down the most valuable book in the genre and without it I'd still be sitting in a classroom somewhere weeping openly while battling with ions, emulsification and covalent bonding. What also piqued my interest was the elegant concept of baking the Lahey loaf in a preheated, tightly covered heavy pot placed within a hot oven. The theory being that when the super-hydrated dough hits the hot vessel in a closed environment it becomes, in effect, its own steam injector. And when it comes to crust, steam is the key—professional bread ovens usually have a steam injection system and many home bakers (me included) frantically spray their ovens with water or throw in ice cubes during the first 10 minutes of bake time in hopes of achieving that crucial moist medium without losing too much heat or shattering the oven light.

Bittman reports testing the recipe numerous times and his

only departure from Lahey's thesis was that it seemed to him overly optimistic to think a 4-year-old could execute this method from start to finish—an ambitious 8-year-old, without a doubt, but 4 was just too young.

Be it 4 or 8, I was intrigued. I know scores of young children with oodles of time on their hands. With a little training and flexible scheduling around naptimes I imagined myself enjoying massive chunks of crackling-crust, Lionel Poilane-style French bread without pricey Parisian hotels or explanations to waiters as to why I speak really bad Japanese instead of really bad French. I decided then and there to conduct my own bread trial. It seemed prudent to split the age difference so I called my friend Keenan, who turned 6 in August. He must have sensed the importance of the project because he immediately cleared his schedule and agreed to get started that same afternoon. As far as I knew, Keenan had never been employed as a professional baker and would therefore be an excellent test subject.

Keenan's unmeasured ingredients were arranged on a work table in the backyard: King Arthur bread flour, kosher salt, instant yeast and water. We verbally reviewed the called-for quantities of each ingredient and the best way to measure liquids (in a clear cup on a level surface) and flour (spooning into the measuring cup as opposed to scooping out of the bag). He mixed two batches with zero assistance from me. They were markedly different; the second batch must have received either more water or less flour. It had the appearance of an extremely slack dough, with a consistency just north of pancake batter. Total mixing time for each batch was about 45 seconds with no kneading at all. After that, Keenan sealed each bowl in a plastic bag and then walked around the backyard looking for Chumash arrowheads.

We met the next day after school and unwrapped the bowls. The surface of each was covered with small bubbles. Keenan smiled and remarked that the dough already smelled like "real bread that you eat." He covered a large wooden board with close to 2 inches of flour, made some swirly designs in it with his fingers and then scraped a batch of what seemed to me exceptionally runny dough onto the floured surface. He used a bench knife to fold it over onto itself a few times and then covered it with some plastic wrap. We let it rest for 10 minutes, passing the time by looking at some colored pieces of broken ceramic tile Keenan dug out of the dirt. (After a quick hand washing) I used a piece of extra dough to demonstrate



how to shape the dough into a ball by first folding it in thirds and then turning it over and rotating it with both hands while simultaneously pulling down on the sides to create surface tension. His piece was a lot wetter than mine and stuck to everything it touched so he ended up just pushing it together like a lumpy snowball, dusting it with wheat bran and covering it again, this time with a cloth. We looked for lost balls in the

bushes and practiced jumping off the back steps while it rose. For the experiment to be legitimate I know I should not have helped Keenan at all. Alas, there was no way short of a protective fire suit I was going to let even this very able 6-year-old handle a 25-pound cast iron pot heated to 450 degrees. So I placed the pot on the floor and watched as he lobbed his wobbly dough ball into the pot from about two feet away. Then the lid went on, the pot went back in the oven and we went to the store for something cold to drink.

Over the years I have had mild success with my efforts at home baking (and by *mild success* I mean consistently disappointing results). In bakery or restaurant situations with first-rate equipment I have produced quality bread, but nothing I've ever baked at home has come close to the golden swan that rose from Keenan's ugly duckling dough ball. Glorious and gently rounded with a smiling fissure along one side, I knew from the very audible crackling sounds it made as it cooled that the crust would shatter nicely when torn. Feeling very pleased with ourselves, and smiling at each other, Keenan and I enjoyed our first chunks very slowly, taking time to study the bits of crumb and crust as we ate them.

To be fair, it must be said that neither the no-knead method nor the idea of baking bread in a tightly closed vessel is a new concept. Baking bread inside a pot was practiced by both the Romans and ancient Chinese. Along with countless other bakers, my brother-in-law, Bill Freese (proprietor of Bill's Bread on Vashon Island in Washington) has been handcrafting long-risen, virtually unkneaded artisanal loaves for well over a decade. So is it simply the combination of these two methods that has taken the food world by storm? (*Storm* isn't an exaggeration either; a quick internet search using the words "bittman no knead" yielded thousands of results in multiple languages.) In the end I suppose the *why* of it is of very little importance. It is quite enough to imagine that a lot of people who might never have done so are baking their first loaves of Bittman-Lahey No-Knead, or as I prefer to call it.

Keenan's Real Bread That You Eat

(Adapted from a recipe by Mark Bittman as demonstrated by Jim Lahey)

- 3 cups (468 grams) bread flour or unbleached all-purpose flour, or a mixture
 - 1/4 teaspoon (0.8 grams, more or less) instant yeast
 - 1 1/4 teaspoons (7.5 grams) salt
 - 1 1/2 cups (354 grams) water
 - Wheat bran or cornmeal, as needed
 - 1 or 2 cotton kitchen towels (not terrycloth)
- One 6- to 8-quart heavy, covered pot (cast iron and enamel both work great)

1. In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the flour, yeast and salt.
2. Stir in the water just until the flour is well moistened to form a soft, very shaggy dough.
3. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let rise at somewhere around 70 degrees for at least 15 and up to 24 hours. The surface will be covered with small bubbles.
4. Scrape dough onto a lightly floured surface, sprinkle with a little flour and fold over onto itself a couple of times. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rest 10-15 minutes.
5. Shape into a ball by first folding in thirds like a letter from left and right and then again from top and bottom. Turn the dough over and quickly shape into a ball. Place folded side down on a large, clean cloth dusted with wheat bran or corn meal. Dust the dough with more bran and then wrap loosely in the cloth.
6. Allow to rise about 2 hours or until about doubled in bulk. At this point, a hole made by pressing a finger into the dough will fill in very slowly.
7. Place a 6- to 8-quart enameled or cast iron heavy, covered pot in the lower third of the oven and preheat the oven to 450 degrees for 30 minutes.
8. Carefully, carefully remove the pot from the oven and take the cover off. Slide a hand under the towel and in one motion; turn dough over and into the pot. Use an oven mitt to shake the pot back and forth if the dough is too far to the side. It will look like a real mess but don't worry.
9. Put the lid back on and bake 30 minutes and then remove the lid and continue baking an additional 15 to 25 minutes until nicely browned. An instant-read thermometer inserted into the center should read 205-210 degrees and the bottom should sound hollow when knuckle thumped.
10. Cool on a rack at least 30 minutes, or until you can't stand waiting any longer.



Authors Note: I've baked KRBTYE over a dozen times now, sometimes substituting whole wheat for close to a third of the bread flour. The reason I've included metric weight in the ingredient list is because once you get the hang of scaling ingredients it is not only much faster but more accurate and more consistent. With that said, this recipe is pretty forgiving; I've neglected it, dropped it, added too much or too little water, but somehow it almost always bakes a more than respectable loaf. If you decide to give it a shot, have the kids help and then send Edible Ojai a picture of you or your family with the loaf ... or a slice ... or whatever's left by the time you grab your camera.