

The “Harvest Table” for AcresUSA

ODE TO THE AMERICAN BISCUIT

by William G. Winter

Hello, bread bashers and haters of white flour, I know what you are thinking. But until you have heard my story, please don't call me a “cereal killer”, and, more than anything, don't take my bread away nor deny me the joy of baking my biscuits. Wait until you hear, as Paul Harvey used to say, “the rest of the story”. And you will want to hear it.

Reading the Bible as a child I was convinced that the *manna* that fell from heaven was surely the same as my mother's biscuits, perhaps a bit lighter but delicious all the same. You will hear more about those biscuits later, I promise. Wheat, the “staff of life”, has informed my being since before I was born, I even dream of my bread. So, if you are willing, come with me on a little journey into not only the soul, wit, poetry and deliciousity of bread, but surprisingly, the nutritive quality of the real thing. A story that, if I tell it well, might have you lovingly stroking your baking pans, making a permanent place for your home grain grinder, and perhaps someday even tending to a bubbling little pot bearing your living sourdough starter.

BAD WHEAT

People are missing so much due to what they don't know about the breeding, growing, processing, storing and baking of good wheat. I come to praise a certain kind of wheat, a certain kind of baking, as well as a return to an old-fashioned way of seeing all things made from wheat. I come to bury our white, bleached, adulterated, brominated, chlorinated, aluminated, degerminated, defibered, oxidized, preserved, embalmed, refined, synthetically-enhanced, and now irradiated, so-called flour. This is the poor substitute for food that people now call “bread”.

Wheat farming has been my family's “bread and butter” since long, long before I was born. I grew up in a wheat farming family in a wheat farming community in western Kansas where, after the bison were all shot, the sodbusters quickly turned the somewhat flat and decidedly dry prairie into wheat farms. With no gnarly forest to remove, settlers really only had to deal with injuns, the now-extinct prairie grizzly, locust plagues and the recurrent dust bowls. The hard Russian winter wheat took an immediate liking to the Kansas soil and climate and the farmers grew to understand a fall-planted cereal grass that could be grazed by cattle over the winter and then, at least on the good years, harvested in golden sheaves by the sun-tanned young men of the thrashing crews that the following summer was sure to bring. My German immigrant grandfather's Kansas wheat farm blew away in the first big Dustbowl of the 1910's. The hot dry wind never blew dust like that back in Germany, plus it always rained there, so why not moldboard plow the top foot of the thin soil upside down? The earlier homesteaders, including my mother's family, tried to show the later-arriving but bull-headed “Dutchmen” how to gently harrow the soil but no one listened. Grandpa Winter

was forced by US law to learn to speak English when the Great War broke out but he never fully recovered his lost wheat farm. Others however, survived those rough early days and even flourished as gradual improvements came in the form of wheat varieties selected for maximum production, bigger tractors and the revolutionary “combine”. But now, a hundred harvests have come and gone and tens of thousands of Kansas wheat farms are in trouble from the “mining” of the topsoil called modern row crop farming, one of the first of the Deadly Sins man has bestowed upon the lovely little kernels that love humans so much. But, if Blake was right, and the Road of Excess does lead to the Palace of Wisdom, perhaps we are just now getting a glimpse of wisdom in the newest chapter of our omnivoric dilemma.

I now reside very near the massive St. Anthony falls, the only distinct waterfall on the Mississippi River, the exact site of the birth of industrial grain milling in the Midwest. Before there was power from coal, oil, gas and abundant electricity the water-driven mill was where most industrial action took place. In the early to mid 1800’s our majestic falls, a sacred site and gathering place to the indigenous peoples, were harnessed to drive massive saw blades that sliced up the last standing forest of the great white pines of the north woods. Within a few years the trees were gone and the water power gave rise to what is now Pillsbury and General Mills, our sister companies that founded the city of St. Anthony, now called Minneapolis. One of my farmer-turned-miller uncles came here often to learn the latest technology required to transform whole wheat into a white substance. Our first professional baseball team was not the Twins, but the Minneapolis Millers.

GOOD WHEAT

To my delight in the kitchen, I have shared the past 20 years of married life and my oven with a professional baker. Rebekah, aka, Queen of Tarts, can make her wheat sing and I have learned much from her witty ways with the wheat berry. She is locally famous for her divine shortbread, her scones and her cookies, tarts and cakes. Since much of the problem with allergies and “gluten intolerance” comes from the use of commodity wheat, bred for maximum production with a great sacrifice in flavor, nutrition and quality, she opts for locally and organically grown heritage wheat strains. In addition to the sprouted organic cereal grains, Rebekah also uses spelt, kamut and other relatives of wheat. The flavors are amazing and we know the nutrition is better. She then uses her Whisper Mill grinder which we purchased at the AcresUSA trade show at least 15 years ago. It is mounted inside a lower cabinet in the kitchen on a lazy susan shelf where it remains plugged in and ready for quick grinding. While she assembles her other ingredients the wheat is silently ground into beautiful and fresh flour. We’d bake far less if we had to get heavy awkward appliances out each time.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A BISCUIT?

Of all things wheat, one of the most interesting and versatile is the lowly biscuit. or I should say what we call a biscuit here in the US. The British “biscuit” is more often what we would sometimes call a cookie or sometimes a cracker, being either sweet or savory in flavor. Think of the two cookies on either side of an ice cream sandwich and you will get one version of the sweet biscuit. The British equivalent of our biscuit is referred to as

a scone, or bannock if from the Shetlands. These triangles or squares are quite often sweet with fruit. Shortcake is another variation of the same sort of quickbread. Most of us are somewhat familiar with hardtack, the hard-as-a-rock, but stores-safely-forever, seafaring man's biscuit. Whalers departing to parts unknown from the American eastern seaboard took the locally-made hardtack on their long voyages. One reason this bread was so hard was that baking powder was not invented until 1856, Prior to that baking soda was used along with cream of tartar or some acid to get leavening. There was not a lot of fat in hardtack either, dietary fat at sea came from the other requisite staple, salt pork. All of these breads have much in common, varying slightly in size, shape, texture and added ingredients. Most recipes are very similar, basically ground wheat flour, a type of fat such as lard, butter or bacon grease, baking powder or soda, seasalt, and milk, buttermilk or cold water. That's it.

American biscuits are most often a quickbread, that is baking powder leavened disc served as a sidedish, often slathered with butter (make sure you use plenty of good grass-fed raw butter!) and something sweet such as home-made jam, jelly, raw honey, molasses or sorghum. Another great way to eat a plateful of home-made American biscuits is to cover them with a cup or two of savory sausage gravy loaded with cream and sausage fat. Although most of us think of biscuits, especially biscuits and gravy as a traditional Southern dish, ironically there were no biscuits in the South until the 1870's when the railroad began to bring wheat from Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas and Minnesota to the hotter areas of the country where wheat cannot be grown. Prior to that time, Southerners dined on corn-derived breads and dishes such as cornbread, corn pone, corn fritters, and of course hominy grits. The gift of corn was so directly connected and attributed to the indigenous peoples that early Southern recipe books called for the addition of some "Indian", which was universally understood to be corn meal. There are also hundreds of variations of "Indian breads" made from not only corn, but also acorn flour, sweet potatoes, chestnuts, and other wild roots. The Indian ground lima beans with corn meal then sweetened the mixture with maple syrup to make succotash. As the white man brought in imports such as sugar cane, bannock, and of course, wheat, the red man adapted them to fire cookery.

Not all biscuits are good, in fact, most are really bad! In my travels across the Midwest I've become reluctant to order biscuits in most truck stop or cafe, places that should by rights be making delicious biscuits. Most are a factory-made, too-thick, too-crumbly mess of tasteless dough, more blob than biscuit. Even the mythical Powdermilk Biscuit would be better! The American biscuit has suffered another shameful tour-de-force in the kitchen with the ubiquitous intrusion of the tasty but nutritionally lethal biscuits in a can, as created by a mutant doughboy. They were better to chop up, throw in hot grease, roll in sugar and eat as a doughnut hole, but, let's just leave that chapter alone, you could get diabetes just thinking back on it!

HOW TO MAKE A REAL BISCUIT

Although the good recipes are quite simple there is an "art" to creating biscuits that bring out the rave reviews. Baking any bread is like playing the piano, that is, if you don't do it on a regular basis, you won't get the magical results. The good news is that

biscuit baking is far easier and much faster than baking yeasted breads, and even your worst ones will almost always be delicious.

Here are my Top Rules for Amazing Biscuits:

- ~Make round symmetrical discs, the rolled dough one-half to one inch thick.
- ~Oven-browned top and bottom, snow-white inside.
- ~They should split open into layers, with small ribbons of soft manna inside
- ~A crispy, thin browned crust, but never crumbly.
- ~The first taste on the tongue should be baking powder, then the hit of salt, and lastly, ahh...“wheat” (something most people have never tasted!)
- ~A clean finish, no aftertaste, and you feel great after eating them!

There are also some handy tips that help make good ones every time. First of all, don't feel like you have to stick religiously to any recipe. One good starting recipe can be found in The Deaf Smith Country Cookbook by Marjorie Ford, but I'd switch from her corn oil to lard or butter. Think of the recipe as a starting point on the way to making your own unique biscuits. The only real reason for measuring anything is to get some degree of consistency. Having made thousands of biscuits at this stage of the game, I measure like my grandma, handfuls, pinches, smidgens and gobs. I'm also quite willing to move from flour to flour, sometimes I'll mix a bit of white pastry flour into my fresh-ground whole wheat flour, perhaps not as nutritious but the texture results and lightness are magical. I use different fats, switching from butter, lard, or even bacon grease (especially good for biscuits with gravy), and my liquids vary from milk, cream, buttermilk or even cold water, often depending upon what I have available. Remember that the fat you use should be cold when added then cut in with a pastry tool or knife. The more you knead the dough, the tougher the biscuit will be and that toughness really ruins the magic. Therefore, I pre-mix all the dry ingredients in a large mixing bowl, cut in the grease, and slowly add my liquid ingredients while I squish them together with my fingers. As soon as the ball of dough can be lifted out, I put it on the rolling area that has been dusted with flour. I knead it a few times, just enough to hold it together, dust it with flour and flatten it with the palms of my hands. When the dough is less than an inch thick (your biscuits may vary), I cut the discs using the top of a drinking glass or a metal cookie cutter about two inches in diameter, twisting it as I cut. Place the discs on a baking sheet so that they touch each other, this helps them rise. Left over dough can be reformed into a second dough ball, and the process is repeated until all the dough is used up. It's fine to have oddball shapes along the edges of the perfect biscuits. A “cats head” biscuit is made from dough that has had more liquid added, and it is dolloped onto the baking pans in globs, some people prefer this style, but not me. My oven works best at about 400 degrees and they will brown in about 12-15 minutes. Serve them in a bowl wrapped in a towel and eat them while the steam rises from the biscuit when it is split open. Needless to say, it's always wise to make a double batch because biscuits keep well and can be easily warmed up in a cast iron skillet or toaster oven (you do know that microwaves are bad news and should never be used for anything, right?).

Only one more thing to do, invite your friends! It would be a total shame to savor your heavenly biscuits all alone! Share the bounty. Life is good.

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