

Meslin Bread

Bread is the staple food for most civilizations. When bread ran out of supply, famine ensued¹. Prior to 900 AD, European civilization was a pastoral economy – hunting, fishing, and stock rearing. After 900 AD, Europe changed to an agrarian economy that led to the development of feudalism and greater populations. Greater populations required *reducere terram ad panem* (making new arable land for more bread)².

The hearty bread I chose to submit for this entry was known as “meslin” in Europe, circa 1554. Meslin bread is the combination of rye and wheat flours. I chose a meslin bread as it closely matches German rye bread (roggenbrot) which ties into my current interest in German cookery. Meslin bread also eliminated two big problems of 100% rye flour: ergotism (also known as Saint Anthony’s Fire in the Middle Ages) and the grayish tinge a wholly rye bread has after baking.

Finding “period” German recipes for bread is difficult, if not impossible. Bakers and brewers spent years learning and improving their craft and shared their knowledge only with a few apprentices and journeymen, so even if the information were written down, it would have only been given to a guild member.

The traditional black bread (schwarzbrot) that many of us see in German delis or in our travels in Germanic cultures is made of modern ingredients. Schwarzbrot usually has molasses as the sugar instead of the sugar made from sugar beets; the flour used is normally a pumpernickel flour hybrid; and cocoa powder is added to darken the color of the baked bread.

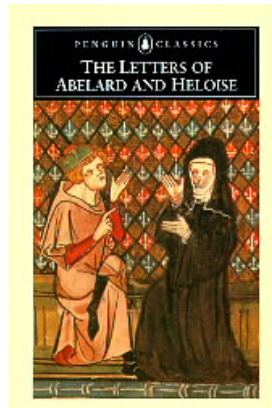
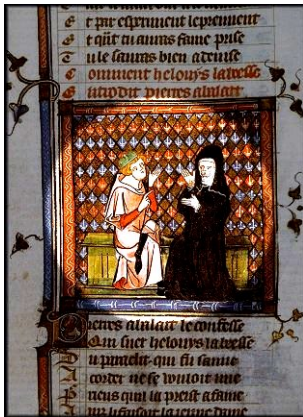
A recent survey of the literature of German breads show that there are over 200 varying recipes for rye bread today in Germany. There are rye bread recipes that have come down through the ages. Most have a wheat flour of some type in the ingredients because rye has very little gluten. Gluten, a special protein molecule, has the property of forming long strings when wet. Relatively abundant in wheat, it forms the tight mesh of strands that traps

carbon dioxide gas, allowing bread to rise. When we make bread, flour is made into dough. In the dough, gluten develops. Other cereal grains do not have sufficient gluten protein.

The Romans admired whiteness in bread and they even adulterated their flour with chalk to enhance its appearance.³ The preference since Roman days was for pure wheat in breads; however, wheat is a fragile crop. With the severe weather variations experienced in the Middle Ages, farmers soon learned to grow rye because it was more hardier than wheat. Having a rye crop was a way to safeguard food production in the event of bad weather.

Anne Wilson in Food and Drink in Britain, a very good secondary source, discusses breads and flours, going from household accounts and bakers' regulations; according to her, higher wheat content and whiter flours increase both up the social scale at any given time and through time during our period. White wheat bread was for the nobility. The domestic servants (die Gesinde) got oats or barley bread, and the farmers and poorer citizen ate rye bread. Only at holidays were there different flour paste supplies in all layers of society.

The earliest recipe I have found so far is dated to about 1115 AD, by Peter Abaelard (also known as Abeillard, Abailard, Abélard, Abaelardus, and Abelardus, among other



variations). Abaelard was a significant contributor to Scholastic philosophy, a brilliant teacher and a writer of no small talent. He is perhaps best known for his love affair with his student, [Heloise](#), and the tragic results; but during his lifetime he was renowned as a philosopher and theologian. Abaelard was concerned that the use of pure wheat products was unhealthy. In the Middle

Ages, everybody ate bread on a daily basis. Pure wheat was reserved for the manchet loaves and for the white wafers used for religious rites in the Church. Pure wheat bread lacked the bran and fiber that was left in the other flours. Abaelard wrote about the goodness of coarser bread as it was better for the health of the person. He wrote:

*"Brot aus reinem Weizen ist streng verboten; wenn Weizen überhaupt da ist, soll mindestens ein Drittel gröberes Mehl daruntergemengt werden. Das Brot darf nicht aus Leckerei warm gegessen werden, sondern es muß mindestens einen Tag alt sein."*⁴

"Bread from pure wheat is strictly forbidden; if wheat is at all there, at least one third rougher flour is to be under it-mixed. Bread may not be eaten warm and sweet, but it must be old at least one day. "

During Abaelard's time, the other whole grains used in breads were rye, spelt, millet, barley, and oats. White bread was not prevalent in the Middle Ages until cheaper sugar sources (sugar cane) was made available in the second half of the 16th Century. Osias Beert, a Flemish painter, shows in one of his still life paintings what manchet⁵ looked like; it resembled almost a cake that the modern palate is familiar with.

Another good secondary source for bread recipes is Madge Lorwin's Dining with William Shakespeare⁶. Ms. Lorwin makes reference to a "Meslin Rye Bread"⁷ that is attributed to Dr. Andrew Boorde (1554) and a "Temmes Rye Bread"⁸ by Thomas Tusser (1573). The Meslin Rye Bread uses equal parts of rye and whole wheat flour, yeast, salt, and sour dough starter. The Temmes Rye Bread is similar except there is no sour dough starter and it adds an equal part of unbleached flour to its recipe.

Modern German rye bread is known as roggenbrot. Roggenbrot today is almost equivalent to meslin bread when we remove the molasses, caraway seeds, and safflower oil. A quick note on molasses: Molasses was discovered in 1512 in the West Indies and it became part of the European culinary closet by the mid 1500s. For my meslin bread, I experimented with the quantities of rye flour and whole wheat flour. I found stone ground flour for my use as the modern flour grinding uses stainless steel rollers. By using the stone ground flour, I got a coarser grain that is closer to the flour cooks would have found in the

Middle Ages. I also made my friends try the various redactions. The one I am presenting today is:

2 ½ cups rye flour

3 tsp salt

2 packages active yeast

1 cup warm water

3 ½ cups whole wheat flour

2 cups warm water

8 T sugar

Use a small bowl and add 1 cup of warm water. Add the yeast and mix it with a wooden spoon. Let it sit for 3 minutes. Then add the sugar. Stir well and let it sit for 5 minutes.

In a large bowl, add the rye and whole wheat flour. Add the salt and mix the dry ingredients well. Form a well in the center and add the yeast liquid. Mix with the wooden spoon. Slowly add the remaining water so that you get a sticky ball of dough. Knead for 10 minutes and then proof for 1 hour with a linen covering over it. Break into 2 loaves and shape it into an oval form. Proof for an additional 45 minutes. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Put the oval loaves on a baking stone and slash a large X on top ½" deep. Bake 45 minutes at 350 degrees. Cool on rack.

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¹ Wright, Clifford A., A Mediterranean Feast, New York:William Morrow & Co:1999, ISBN 0-688-15305-4, p. 26.

² Wright, Clifford A., p. 26.

³ Wilson, C. Anne, Food and Drink in Britain, Chicago:Academy Chicago Publishers:1991, ISBN 0-89733-364-0, p. 233.

⁴ Abaelard, Die Leidensgeschichte und der Briefwechsel mit Heloisa, München 1987, p. 329.

⁵ Riley, Gillian, Renaissance Recipes (Painters & Foods series), San Francisco:Pomgranate Artbooks:1993, ISBN 1-56640-577-7, p, 81.

⁶ Lorwin, Madge, Dining with William Shakespeare, New York:Atheneum:1976, ISBN 0-689-10731-5, pages 145-6 and 214.

⁷ Boorde, Andrew, Here foloweth a compedyous regyment or a dyetary of helth, made in Moutpylior, London:St. Martin's Parish (Charing Cross):1554, Virginia Tech Newman Library: Z2002 U575 1706:6 (microfilm). Alternate titles are Compedyous regiment or Dyetary of helth.

⁸ Tusser, Thomas, Five hundreth points of good husbandry united to as many of good huswiferie, London:Richard Tottill:1573, Virginia Tech Newman Library: Z2002 U575 1717:28 (microfilm).