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Bread - Seeking The Aroma Of Life

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Auf der Suche nach dem Duft des Lebens)

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Sample translation by Catherine Venner

1. Introduction

What do you discover when seeking an aroma?

An operation and its salubrious consequences. The aroma of rye bread is stronger than that of office roses and Hermès perfume. A library made of dough. Why I'm writing this book.

My interest in bread was kindled when I regained my ability to smell after an operation on my nasal polyps. For years, I had hardly been able to smell anything. I was suffering from a histamine intolerance, a rather exclusive disorder that only affects about one percent of the European population. The polyps were growing up through my sinuses and blocking my olfactory nerves.

If I ate food containing histamines, such as tuna, well-matured cheese or dark chocolate or if I drank red wine (really bad) or champagne (even worse), the polyps embarked on an additional growth spurt spurred on by the undegraded histamines and I was sniffing even more. After that, I was no longer able to smell anything at all. However, it did sometimes have its advantages, like in the summer when the underground was full of easyJet tourists drinking cheap beer. However, over time the loss of your sense of smell is accompanied by the loss of your inner compass for other people and situations.

Smelling is the heart's way of feeling. And not being able to smell for a long period is like being under emotional house arrest. Neither the fragrance of a field of lavender in bloom in Provence nor the scent of a lover's skin was able to rouse my olfactory nerves. These things had just as little aroma as the spice stand at the market. Although I could see the vibrant colours in my food, the capsicums tasted just as bland as pepper or coriander.

In the Summer of 2013, I finally decided to undergo an operation and a professor at the Meoclinic in Berlin by and large succeeded in removing these nasty polyps from my nose. After two weeks of convalescence, I was able to go back to work. I had stopped sniffing and the swelling had gone down but I still couldn't smell anything.

And so, there I was in the boardroom on the 18th floor of the Axel Springer building sitting through an excruciatingly boring meeting on digitalisation, social media and paid content. It was an unbelievably hot August day, jackets were hung over chair backs and the chairman monopolised the meeting. His garish green tie promised freedom and spontaneity in stark contrast to the tired looking conference biscuits on the conference table.

At this precise moment in this precise place my sense of smell returned. However, it was not an aroma of power, office roses and Hermès perfume that awoke my nerves. Rather it happened as Carsten, the short, plump Dane with the charming way of pronouncing his S's, who had worked at Springer since the seventies and had even served as a butler for the legendary Axel Springer at his Patmos residence, entered the room with a rickety serving trolley.

My recovering nose smelt this exceptional bouquet with the greatest of intensity. A fine hint of caraway, a strong note of rye, the warm aroma of grain and at the same time something completely gratifying. Indeed an aroma that stimulates the nose cells is composed of least 400 components.

Carsten had baked fresh bread.

The fragrance of the dark rye slices brought back vague memories of a veiled past. At once, the smell engulfed me and the cloak was being slowly lifted.

Bread is the smell of coming home and of someone waiting for you. Bread is the smell of love and family. I was unable to forget this aroma after I had smelt it again at this conference of hard-nosed media managers of all places. It had made a beeline from my nose to my heart. And so, I set out on a journey to discover the emotions and the history behind this aroma. Not to mention the perfect bread.

I started to look at the world from the perspective of an oven and attempted to sample as many different types of bread as possible.

Wholemeal rye, mixed wheat and rye bread, the aggressive army bread, cordial crusty spelt bread, hearty Heidebrot and the Swabian soul made of wheat sourdough. I wondered what a Franconian loaf, knight's bread, Mang bread and Schlüter bread tasted like. I sampled pumpernickel bread for the first time in years and established that I still don't like it. And there is mountaineer bread, home time bread, MalfaKraftma bread, brewer's bread, Eifel spike bread, spelt vital bread, court loaf, carrot bread, chestnut bread, sunflower bread, summer corn bread, spent grain bread, walnut bread, guild's bread, shepherd's bread, Korntal bread, lupine bread, Pomeranian bread and pide.

I have just listed 30 types of bread. That is barely one percent of the exactly 3,188 bread specialities recognised at the time of writing by the German association of bakers, the *Zentralverband des deutschen Bäckerhandwerks*.

So many recipes, so many flavours, so many stories. What will I discover on my search for the aroma of the perfect bread? Or will the sheer variety overwhelm me?

For example, the MalfaKraftma mentioned above is a product of the former GDR that was developed by the state-owned baked goods company and is a rye-wheat bread with a ten percent roasted barley malt flour content. It was available in almost every Konsum store in East Germany but today it is only sold in a few bakeries around Plauen. It is dark brown with an aromatic and malty taste, and a soft crust.

Is such knowledge useful?

I think so because this MalfaKraftma bread chronicles a tale of an economy of scarcity and large-scale production. It also tells how the GDR planners succeeded in mixing the cheap barley, which for decades had only been used as animal feed, into the rye flour and sneaking it back into the bread aisles.

Many East Germans consider the MalfaKraftma bread as a lost delicacy, while for others it wakes unpleasant memories of Free German Youth camps and school dinners.

Each bread is a history book made of dough.

Bread incites revolutions. Bread establishes religions. Bread starts wars and brings peace. Bread gives you coeliac disease and a fear of wheat-bloated bellies. And at the same time, artisan bread baked from “happy” flour is becoming a status symbol in our age of food neuroticism.

I decided that in order not to be overwhelmed in the library containing thousands upon thousands sorts of bread, it would be a good idea to first bake some bread myself.

And so I cultivated my own sourdough and was as proud as Frankenstein when it started to stink on the third day.

Later, with hopelessly sticky fingers I kneaded the dough for the original Russian Borodinski bread and I failed at plaiting the seven strands of Jewish challah bread.

The research for this book took over two years. And writing it was as time consuming as growing a sourdough culture.

During this period, my awareness of baked goods radically changed.

I soon believed that I could taste the difference between handmade and industrially produced bread.

Previously, I had thought of bread as nothing more than an edible plate to display tempting cold cuts or cheese. Now, I felt deep contentment upon biting into a well baked rye-wheat bread with a good crust. A bread like that with butter and chives or sliced radish had suddenly become a complete and satisfying meal for me.

On the other hand, I was getting increasingly frustrated that, for example, it had become so difficult to buy a decent pretzel. When I was living in Munich in the early nineties, fresh buttered pretzels had been my go-to snack. Then later, when I visited Munich, I always bought myself a pretzel before even leaving the train station. But the more attention I paid to the taste, the sadder I became about these part-baked imposters in imitation bakeries. The reign of reheatable bread made me angry.

In July 2016, the German Federal Government answered a request from the Green parliamentary group and reported that since 1998, the number of bakeries in Germany has halved. It revealed that in 1998 there were still 21,406 bakeries in Germany. However, by 2015 this figure had fallen to 12,155.

Bavaria still has the most bakeries; 2,608 to be precise. That is roughly one bakery to every 4,900 residents. The German average is one bakery to every 6,700 potential customers.

Bavaria is followed by the states of Baden Württemberg (1,864 bakeries) and North Rhine-Westphalia (1,826 bakeries).

According to the government’s data, it is rare for new bakeries to open. The reason is the “increasingly complex conditions for an entrepreneur in the artisan food sector” and the fierce competition in the baked goods market.

I learnt that for years, a German bakery has closed nearly every day and I became aware of the major upheavals that the industry has undergone in recent years.

I actually attempted to crawl into an Aldi baking oven and pestered the German Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture for months with my questions to its minister, Christian Schmidt, who is the son of a baker himself.

But I also spoke to enthusiastic bakers, who dug out old recipes and breathed new life into their bakeries.

I met a baker who made millions through his profession and became incredibly rich and I met another who after a hard day's work had only made a profit of five euros. He wants to close the bakery, which has been in his family for nearly 500 years, as soon as possible.

At an industrial estate near the motorway in Magdeburg, I visited a factory belonging to HarryBrot, the German market leader in the baking sector. There, I saw a 75 meter long oven that can produce ten thousand buns in one hour and I witnessed the industrial production of bread without a single touch by a baker's hand.

I visited Carsten Peter Schwarz, who saved Germany's oldest bakery, the "Freibackhaus" in Lübeck, and I looked around one of the few newly established bakeries in Germany, "The Bread Station". It was opened in the Neukölln district of Berlin by two friends from Copenhagen using money raised from crowdfunding.

I saw a special variety of rye blooming in Rechtmehring in Upper Bavaria and I began to appreciate that flour isn't simply flour.

I looked into the rumour that cysteine, an ingredient put into many bread mixes to make the crust crispier, is extracted from Asian women's hair or rather from the pubic hair of Thai prostitutes. And of course, I was transfixed by the discussion about the re-authorisation or permanent ban of glyphosate.

I discovered that in Germany we throw away approximately 500,000 tons of bread each year and that there are plans to permit the use of old bread as a fuel (with a higher calorific value than wood pellets).

I walked around the iba, the world's leading trade fair for bakery, confectionery and snacks in Munich and felt as if I were at a weapons exhibition organised by the arms industry.

I followed the aroma of bread to the Medina of Marrakesh, to the moors around Edinburgh, to Stalinism-ravaged Albania and to the Austrian Alps.

On the Kalchkendl alpine pasture in Salzburg's Rauris Valley, I discovered the importance of water and air for the success of a good farmhouse loaf.

I baked with polyphonic singing Albanian goat herds on the meadows, with Fatima Zohra, a Moroccan Berber woman and with Andrew, the BBC correspondent who smuggled sourdough out of the former Soviet Union back to England in his socks and who owes his second life to this soughdough.

With every bread that I tasted and with every interview that I conducted, I increasingly realised how much our history and our present is shaped by bread.

Little by little, my suddenly ignited interest and my longing for the smell of aromatic bread turned into a little knowledge.

In all of my research and on all my journeys the fundamental question was always: What is the bread telling me about the people who eat it, about the conditions that it is baked in, about the culture from which it comes and about the spirit of the times, which determines people's palates.

Bread reflects the world. Bread reflects the era.

There are as many stories about bread as there are sheaves of wheat in a field. I have tried to piece the grains together.

And lastly, I also baked with my mother. Or rather I watched how her arms and hands disconnected from her 86-year-old body, became young and mobile again, and almost automatically worked the dough.

We were standing in her small kitchen. She kneaded while we chatted.

It was to be a **simple bread**; she had been using the recipe for decades.

350 grams whole wheat flour

150 grams spelt flour

20 grams fresh yeast

1.5 teaspoons salt

Gradually stir 300 millilitres lukewarm water into the dough.

Add a sprinkling of fennel and caraway.

Then bake the dough in a pre-heated oven at 190 degrees for one hour. During this hour, my mother told me my grandfather's story for the first time.

How he roamed through Salzburger Land and Tirol working as a wandering baker renting premises in a new village every two to three years: Sankt Johann, Lofer and Waidring. How swastika flags were already flying everywhere. She told how his family grew by one or two children in each village.

How they moved to the city of Salzburg after 1945. How my grandfather finally opened his own bakery. And why the bakery had to close in the seventies, and how addicts are now cared for on the premises.

Maybe I started to investigate bread just so that I would hear this story.