

A WELL-BREAD CHILD REMEMBERS



If you ask me about my favorite food, my attention is immediately drawn to the kitchen of my childhood, a large square room with many doors and odors (both spellings work). The sense of space and smell intermingle. Everything that mattered took place in this arena, though the furnishings were sparse: the wood

stove and the adjacent wood box, the iron sink supporting a metal pump, and the sturdy rectangular table and chairs where we gathered for meals.

Those doors: I count them in memory. One led to the formal parlor sometimes used for dining with guests, another led to the hallway stairs rising to the bedrooms. A third took us down steps to the covered walkway through a shed to the outhouse located in the attached barn. A fourth door opened into a closet that could access the parlor as well and invited exploration on rainy days as a place to hide in games we played. The fifth door was always open because it led to a compact pantry from which emanated many of the aromas that made the kitchen an inviting place to linger, hoping for a taste of some fresh confection before it was assigned its place in a cookie jar or bread box for later consumption.

This was rural New England, where all of life centered on the kitchen. It was where my mother was found most of the day, and when my grandmother lived with us, she would be there too. My brother filled the wood box, and came in to eat, but soon departed to the

yard to play with friends. My father helped stoke the fire each morning—essential to everything that would go on the rest of the day.

One food dominated the use of the space: that most basic of staples, whole wheat bread. The hair trigger of memory is that magical moment when my mother opened the heavy iron oven door and carefully lifted each freshly baked loaf from its shelf, and set it on the table to cool; the smell wafted to me wherever I was, and drew me into the kitchen to sample just one slice while it was still hot. The memory of that moist texture, melting butter, is an ecstasy now, in a life that only knows store bread wrapped in plastic.

That one moment was a climax of a series of moments beginning early in the morning—sometimes even the night before. Baking bread began with preparation of the ingredients mixed in a giant pail, fixed with a lid that was attached to the stirring blades. The temperature of every ingredient was important, as well as the timing: inserting the yeast, cranking the handle to knead the dough, covering it up to let it rise, punching it down and letting it rise again. There was real physical work involved, as my mother's muscular arms demonstrated.

The whole process remained a mystery to me, yet mother seemed to instinctively know the texture and timing so that the finished loaves remained light and porous, yet substantial.

I could not end this without reference to the special times when she turned some of the dough into sweet rolls. She would roll the dough out flat, spread it with a mixture of brown sugar, raisins, and cinnamon, then roll it up, cut it in sections, and lay each roll in a flat pan to bake. Something about this alteration from routine to satisfy my sweet tooth bespoke generosity in a peculiarly significant way. Ours was a culture bred in Great Depression frugality, with attention to plain and healthy eating of just the necessities. Sweet rolls were an indulgence, a carefree splurge, giving immoderate pleasure both to giver and receiver.