

MEMORY OF BREAD

© Sylvie Vidaillac, March 13, 2021

I had my ammunition ready for the imminent raid. A dozen small, dense, carefully rounded pellets, the size of small peas, slightly hidden under the rim of my plate. I could see in his eyes that he, also, was ready. It was just a matter of time – both waiting for a hint, before the kitchen would transform into a fierce battlefield. These little flying balls, in a hail of crumbs that had shifted from creamy white to the dark grey of our greasy fingers, lashed down on the table in the thundering of loud laughter.

In less than a minute – not long enough to be told off by the impatient voice of our parents – we would run out of crumb and would have to launch a new production. We simply needed another slice of bread. Eat the crust, roll the crumb.

Bread.

The best part is the *quignon*. This is a part of the bread that only the French can eat: since the word does not exist in English, it must be that English bread has no *quignon*. That peninsula of the *baguette* – with its twin on the other end - is hard, crunchy, and the sound of its explosion in the mouth is the roaring cry of a log burning in a campfire. Real connoisseurs will opt for an *epi*, which has 10 times the number of pointed pieces. When I was the one going to the bakery, I would choose the *epi* indeed, and by the time I was back home, I had already savored 2 or 3 of these little “ears” of bread. When our budget allowed, I would please myself with a *ficelle*, that very thin bread that in fact looks like a stick, hence its name, a string. Not much crumb there, full rejoicing in a guiltless delicacy. If it was *baguette*, it would certainly arrive home amputated on both ends. The fate of a crunchy *baguette* is a sure thing: the crunchy *quignons* are the first to go. So I thought.

But that day, my certitude collapsed. It was hot, humid, sticky and dark. We had flown the entire day and Dad had reserved a table at the best restaurant in town to welcome us to Africa. An exceptional treat, the one and only time. High on the upper floors of the Hotel Ivoire, we welcomed the wicker basket with great appetite. Dad saw on our faces the disappointment mixed with our shouted wondering. “It’s too humid here; the bread doesn’t stay crispy more than an hour or two.”

And so it was. For 3 years, we had soft and floppy bread. That was the end of my romance with the *baguette*.

I met the *flute* when I was 12, when we moved back to France. Of course, I already knew that larger shape of bread but at the boarding school, I really got to know her. I say “her” because, you see, bread is feminine. Or almost always. We say “le pain”, the masculine form, because it refers to the abstract concept of bread, it is an idea, but as soon as the bread takes shape and incarnates into real food, it becomes “une *baguette*”, “une *flute*”, “une *couronne*”. Or maybe not always. *Epi* is masculine after all. Possibly because it is sharper. So sharp, that it sometimes scratches your palate and can even cut your fingers. Nevertheless, I like the theory of a mothering bread.

My parents rarely had *flutes*. “Too much white crumb,” my father would say. But at school, they probably thought we needed more of it. The dormitory was just above the kitchen, and the baker delivered our *flutes* just before our breakfast. Going down the stairs in the early morning, I would smell the warmth of the anticipated promise: big slices that I would gladly cut for all the tables

already set in the refectory. A giant basket just below the slicing board collected the crumbs – enough for a whole forest of birds – and I would cut and cut and cut, dozens of those rebellious slices that would not hold their shape. Too fresh, too warm, too hot. The crackling smell of the baker’s oven was still alive in the newborn loaves.

Never mind the shape. The taste was a dream. Covered with a thick layer of butter, the vessel would end its course dipped in a bowl of hot *café au lait*. But disagreement is to be expected here. As with so many things in French cartesian culture, we need clear positions. “Either/or” prevails; “both/and” can certainly not apply to the philosophical question of the early day: “*Tu trempes ton pain, toi?*” Yes, I do. As indeed, nothing beats the softening of a slice of bread plunged into steaming coffee, the melting of chunks of butter now revealing a gastronomic clair-obscur marriage of cold and hot. It requires practice though, a rhythm to master, in order not to linger there too long and make your butter disappear into the bowl, leaving oily blueish rings on the brown surface. A mastery that pays off with the savory nutty taste that this alchemy has brought to life in the first bites of the day.

For 3 years, I stayed with the *flute*. Then I moved to the big city. High school boarding was not the same. I don’t recall having had bread there. It was a hard time I guess, or perhaps chocolate is more popular with teenagers. It was during the weekends, when I was back home, in the small village we were now settled in, that I was introduced to the *couronne*. As though the size of bread were expanding with my life, the *couronne* was much bigger, an adult version of bread maybe. The *couronne* was indeed round, a wheel of bread with a hole at its center, a well that generously molded even more crust to caress. The local baker delivered twice a week. His white *Renault 4L* was dusty and noisy. The dog would bark at the sight of it on the long driveway to

our house. The friendly man would honk just before stopping right at the door and hand 2 or 3 rings of life to my mother or to me. They were rustic crowns of wood-fired bread. The baker's car smelled like an extension of his oven, a mix of ashes, smoke, charcoal and bread. The crust was as hard as the rocks bordering the pathways of that dry and wild Quercy region. Unlike the *baguette*, which leaned toward a stable yellowish color, or the *flute*, which added some white lines and clouds to the golden shape, *couronnes* were an ode to impressionism. From the burnt sierra of a Mexican hacienda to the Terra Cota of a Spanish jar, the roundness of those jewels was accentuated by a certain patchiness of shades of white flour and sprinkles of charcoal. The bottom was always dark, sometimes black, and we knew those loaves were the ones from the back of the oven and had been last out of the burning alcove. I loved *couronnes*. There was a kind of tenderness to their shape, maybe in the way I could slide my hand into the nest they offered and circle my fingers around to hold their friendly companionship.

Our neighbor – my father's aunt, Berthe – preferred the *miche*: a large loaf of bread without any hole in it, except indeed those of the sourdough itself, which had much more room to expand in a nothingness that smelled so good. Berthe would cut thick slices from that big ball for the traditional *gouter* at 4pm. My cousin Francis was the expert at cutting. Before every cut, he would make the sign of the cross on the bread with his *Opinel*, the traditional wood-handled knife that all farmers kept in their pocket. With large and dirty hands, as dark as the bottom of the loaf, he would hold the precious *miche*, turn it on its side, make the sign of the cross over it quickly in a spontaneous gesture that seemed to be both a thanking and a prayer, and then prepare pieces to eat with blocks of cheese already waiting on the plate. Their farm was just near our house. I was there every day all summer. I liked the giant slices covered with Nutella that I ate in the shade under the generous trees, sharing from time to time with the begging dogs.

My aunt received her deliveries from the same baker in the noisy car. I asked him if he would teach me how to bake bread. The old man smiled and invited me to join him in the early hours whenever I wanted. I did a few times. Not enough to learn how to make bread, but enough to respect it even more. The love of authentic and patient bread making was planted, and the seeds would eventually grow.

That was 30 years ago.

After a few failed attempts at making bread in the years that followed, I abdicated and resolved to join the ranks of the eaters of “fake bread” in the new country on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean that I called home. “*Le faux pain*” was the name we gave to the industrial, sliced sandwich bread we sadly accepted as our daily bread. How could it be true bread if it had no real crust? Children of a new era in a new world, my daughters grew up with square slices polluted by sugar, which we toasted and covered with peanut butter. I did not know that what is new is not always better than what was. And I wanted to embrace the new culture. It did not take long, however, to develop a talent for finding the Canadian sibling of the gifted baker I had left behind. I found him, finally. And some others, across the country. It was never exactly the same, of course, but it was good enough, and certainly enough to initiate the young palates of my little ones to the “real thing”.

The real thing.

The daily bread that feeds our soul. Consolation in times of unrest; comfort food in times of sickness; delicacy in times of self-indulgence; sign of friendship in times of sharing; gift of hospitality, all the time. Bread is work, and life, and creation. “*Avoir du pain sur la planche* »

tells of the work left to be done. « *Manger son pain blanc* » tells of the easiness of good days, black bread representing the harshness of the difficult life of peasants and the poor – the ones who could not afford to use bleached flour for their bread. If only they had known that people would one day pay a higher price for the now trendy healthier darker whole bread.

When time is “*long comme un jour sans pain*”, it means ennui has taken over you, so much that it feels like a day without bread, without air, without life...

As indeed, “*ceci est mon corps.*”

I have not had a *couronne* in years. Over time, I have learned and practiced enough to rejoice in making a few *baguettes* here and there, but I mostly bake the voluptuous and sensual *miche*. I understand my aunt now. The *miche* certainly speaks of the roundness and the fullness that fills the older age of a woman’s life.

My daughter will soon get married. I think it’s time to learn how to bake a crown.