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WEEKEND BREAK

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Flatbread is equally good with savory foods like dips and stews, or covered in honey and butter.

Photos by Damian Mullinix

HEARTFIRE *and* BRIMSTONE

Mastering flatbreads key to nutritional contentment

By NATALIE ST. JOHN
Chinook Observer

Legend has it that Gold Rush miners snuggled their crocks of sourdough starter on winter nights to keep them healthy and warm. It’s also said that particularly hard-up miners would drink the alcoholic gray “hooch” that sometimes forms on top of a starter. There’s give and take in every good relationship, I suppose.

I have not been nearly so attentive to my own starter. Frankly, if it were a child, someone would have called the cops years ago. However, I’m trying to be better about feeding it each week. So now I’m facing the problem of all good starter-parents: What in the hell do I do with all this stuff?

A flatbread of our own

The King Arthur Flour website offers recipes for great sourdough crackers and a couple of other things you can make with excess starter. But I had flatbread on the brain the other night as I contemplated my foaming jar of starter. I’d been reading about msemen, a buttery Moroccan flatbread often sold as a street food. I had to have one, but I was miles from the nearest souk. A little experimentation and a lot of butter yielded a startlingly good, slightly tangy flatbread with a shatteringly crisp shell and an interior of delicate, chewy layers. I ate the first few drenched in honey, but they were perfect for swiping up stew when I made them again a few nights later.

Many other cultures have a flatbread that accompanies nearly every meal. We don’t, but we should. I like the idea that foreign influences and a very local ingredient — each starter is a microcosm of that region’s native yeasts — can combine to make something that connects us to the rest of the world and to our own heritage.

The world is flat

In Mexico, no one eats a hot meal without a rolled-up tortilla in one hand. Ethiopian families scoop up fragrant stews with enormous buckwheat crepes called injera. The Norwegians have lefsa; Native Americans, frybread; Malaysians, roti; Indians, naan. Throughout the Near East and Middle East, people eat variations of the pillowy round bread we call “pita.”

We don’t have an American flatbread “because we have utensils,” my Beloved opined. “By the time



Dough will look ragged and sticky at first, but after a few minutes of kneading, it should look smooth and springy.

we got here, we were like, ‘Hey, we’ve got these things called knives and forks.’” If that’s actually true, then I submit that maybe we latched onto cutlery as a kind of status symbol. Maybe the unleavened breads that used to be ubiquitous in America have mostly fallen by the wayside because we associate them with hard times.

Hard times, hard bread

They say the formula for comedy is tragedy plus time. Tragedy plus time plus flour yields a distinctly different result: breads that are designed to be eaten on depressing road trips. History bears me out on this.

When the Pilgrims quit England, they packed huge quantities of “hardtack,” a thin, extremely long-lasting flour and water cracker with roughly the same culinary qualities as sheetrock. Nicknames for hardtack, according to the ever-reliable Wikipedia, included “molar-breakers” and “worm castles.” Well before their journey to America was through, their supply became infested with maggots and weevils.

They ate it anyway, probably telling their wee Pilgrim progeny that it “built character.”

Pioneers often packed hardtack on their journeys west. It certainly beat the items on the Donner Party’s menu, but it was undeniably awful and lacking in nutritional value. With the advent of railroads, travelers were never more than a day or two from the next grocery store. Hardtack quickly fell out of fashion.

In 1864, the U.S. Government forced Arizona Navajos to take “The Long Walk,” a grueling 300-mile journey to a new settlement in New Mexico. Until then, the Navajo diet consisted largely of vegetables and beans, but those weren’t available after they left for their new “home.” The travelers quickly began to starve. “Relief” came in the form of government rations of flour, sugar, salt and lard. Being pretty much the only thing a person could make from that combination of ingredients, frybread was born.

Sixty-five years later, the economy went down like a lead balloon, and thousands of poor Americans were forced to hit the road in search of work. Again, flour and lard were among the only foodstuffs these destitute travelers could afford, so fried dough balls became a staple of Great Depression cooking. Cornbread soaked in buttermilk and biscuits covered with corn syrup are among the other foods our ancestors ate when they were barely getting by.

Elephant ears and the arc of history

Frybread lives on in Indian Country — a staple for some, a symbol of adversity and survival for others. I’ve eaten it at a roadside stand on the Warm Springs reservation, with stew in Gallup, New Mexico, at a potluck for participants in the annual Canoe Journey, and buried under refried beans and ground beef as a “Navajo taco.”

Elsewhere in America though, people rarely consume fried dough unless they’re standing in a long line on a carnival midway, trying to decide, “Should I top my ‘elephant ear’ with cinnamon sugar or strawberry jam?” Lo, these many years later, the one-time Meal of Last Resort has become a special treat for which the vendors’ profit margin is roughly 6,000 percent.

My flatbread, while not so laden with either historical significance or lard, is no less rich.

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