

## MEDIA REVIEW

**Bread, a Slice of History**

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**The authors and content**

The collaboration of a triumvirate of authors from London Southbank University has resulted in a fascinating book covering the importance of bread during changing history and civilizations. John Marchant is Head of the National Bakery School and contributing the technological aspects to the story of bread along with Bryan Reuben who is Professor of Chemical Technology. Joan Alcock is an archaeologist and food historian and an Honorary Visiting Fellow, contributes the historical aspects. All three are authors in their own right and a list of their relevant publications is given.

The synergistic result from the combination of such knowledgeable authors is a very good read for devotees of bread cereal science and technology, its evolution and its history.

The book with its very apt title has 13 chapters – a baker's dozen – which chronicle breadmaking from Prehistory, Classical and Biblical times through to the current day. There are three useful appendices for gluten gluttons, units for wheat, bread and money, and bread and wheat statistics (for various periods from 1545). There is a bibliography and a comprehensive index.

**The chapters**

The first chapter deals with the periods when bread became a staple – a switch from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one of settled agriculture with the cultivation of cereals. It starts with Neolithic times and continues with crops cultivated throughout the Egyptian, Greek, Jewish and Roman worlds. The techniques of grinding the wheats and the methods of baking the unleavened breads are illustrated and explained as they evolved in these societies.

The development of the conversion of grain into flour and then into bread by the Anglo-Saxons through to the Agricultural Revolution in the British Isles is chronicled in Chapter 2. There are anecdotes about the status of bread in these societies, the desire to be seen to use white flour (a status symbol because of its cost) and the lengths that households would go to protect their supplies. At the other end of the

social scale, the adulteration of flour to produce bread, such as 'Hogman' flour with ground beans and peas, for the peasants and the importance of bread from both a religious and nutritional (in times of famine) viewpoint are detailed.

The organization of bakers into 'Guilds' which began as early as 1155 and developed as a result of the Assize of Bread (1266) and their responsibilities, as both producer and policeman, in overseeing weights and prices makes interesting reading. In those days there was an established scale between the price of wheat and a loaf of bread. The harnessing of both wind and waterpower to grind wheat is given plenty of coverage in describing the development of mills.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, flour milling embraced the construction of mechanically operated flour mills and the economies of scale that they offered. The evolution of milling technology during the period 1786–1820 is described in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 considers the legislation and politics which grew alongside milling flour and its conversion to the baked product. The effect of the Corn Laws, introduced to protect the interests of the aristocracy and landowners, and their eventual abolishment is described. The social and working conditions and diseases experienced by bakers compared with other trades makes for depressing reading but is very much a part of the evolution of laws to protect human rights.

The development of the wheat growing lands in the American West and Canada and their impact on the bread industry as a result the opening up of a supply of wheat from overseas with the building of new flour mills near the major ports in the United Kingdom are all briefly expanded in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 returns to the technology of flour milling with the use of ancillary equipment and the origins of roller milling in Switzerland and its uptake in England by Henry Simon. Chapter 7 returns to the plight of the small baker and the impact that mechanization had on the baking industry in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. During this time both oven and mixer technology was brought into the United Kingdom from the United States. Automation

was beginning to rear its head and with the easier communications and transport around the world along with the hunger for all things new led to a period of great change in the baking industry. The introduction of plant bakeries gained momentum and is well described here.

The same transition period from 1870 to 1914 (turn of a century) is examined from the evolution of the bread product itself in Chapter 8. Statistics are given about bread consumption. Bread became whiter, cheaper and less adulterated. Before this period bread was the main source of nutrition for the masses but by 1914, with social progress and affluence, it was no longer considered to be a staple. The role that Hovis and Wonder Flour played in the controversy about the efficacy of brown (wholegrain) versus white bread along with the use of advertising is amusingly narrated. Education for the masses was gaining momentum and the National Bakery School was founded at the Borough Polytechnic (1892) to meet the need for trained bakers and teachers.

The two World Wars and the period between them are allotted to Chapter 9 with the difficulties of importing wheat during wartime and the measures taken to ensure the population had sufficient to eat all being elaborated. It was as a result of an order following the 1st World War that the United Kingdom adopted weights for a 1 lb (454 g) loaf or multiples thereof (a practice only recently abandoned in the United Kingdom). The inter-war period saw the rationalization of the industry with the growth of companies such as Spillers, Joseph Rank, J.Lyons & Co., Westons and the Co-operative Society and the consolidation of the technologies used with the most notable inventions being the slicing and wrapping machines for bread. In the second World war the 'National Loaf' became the norm as the government took control of flour mills and decreed higher extraction rates (to 85%), calcium carbonate was added to flour to counter the expected deficiencies in nutrition as a result of milk and cheese shortages, and acetic acid was added to prevent 'rope' formation.

The time following the second World War was one of great technological and commercial change and the book details these up to the current day. Starting with the breeding of dwarf disease-resistant wheats and continuing with new dough-making processes, many of which are aired

in print in Chapter 10. Needless to say, there are sections on the Wallace and Tiernan Do-Maker Process and the Chorleywood Bread Process (CBP), both of which utilized mechanical development of the dough. Disappointingly in the case of the CBP the facts are not 100% accurate in this text, particularly about the reasons for its invention.

Chapter 11 is devoted to information about the United Kingdom's big players in the bread industry and their rise and, in some cases, fall as they meet the challenges of 21st century business.

In the final two chapters the authors look at the demand for new bread products and, in particular, the rise of ethnic and variety breads, morning goods, organic breads and other fermented products to meet the demands of a changing population with various lifestyles and incomes. The introduction of bakery units such as Supermarkets' In-store bakeries with their ranges of scratch, frozen and 'bake-off' and part-baked products and the product diversification of traditional bakeries to attempt to maintain a dwindling market share makes interesting reading. The authors only glimpse into the future of bread making – but then, this is not a criticism, after all it is a book about the history of bread!

## Conclusions

The book is novel in that it describes the technological as well as the social side of the history of bread. It claims not to be comprehensive 'but instead identifies a series of seminal events in which there were step changes in the way bread was produced, and also evaluates the social and economic changes resulting from them.' The book is full of facts, anecdotes and interesting illustrations. Whilst the book deals mainly with the history of breadmaking in the United Kingdom, for those who enjoy learning about the events and technological inventions and improvements which have shaped our breadmaking history and the social changes which have given it direction, it is a book well worth reading.

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