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Bread Baking As Opportunity

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Editors note: *This publication contains the video of the talk from the Fermentology webinar series, as well as a lightly edited transcript of the lecture.*

Abstract

Bread baking presents us with countless opportunities: reflection, patience, nourishment, generosity, observation... and the list goes on and on and on!! In this session, [Josey Baker](#) will explore some of the opportunities he has found in his decade of bread baking, both from the perspective of a baker but also from the perspective of a neighbor and community member, and will posit some questions that he has found through bread that he has yet to answer. Josey is a bread baker, published author, teacher, and business owner based in San Francisco, CA. He is the founder of the bakery Josey Baker Bread, and co-owner of The Mill, a cafe/bakery in San Francisco, CA. He is the author of *Josey Baker Bread* (Chronicle, 2014), and leads a small team of bread bakers & pizza makers who specialize in freshly milled whole grain sourdough. Josey has taught baking workshops all over the world, and has a loyal and passionate following he has built over the past decade baking bread. He takes great pride in working to embody a balance of integrity, quality, compassion and fun in everything he does.

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Introduction

Bread baking presents us with countless opportunities for reflection, for observation, for nourishment. I think one of the biggest opportunities that bread baking gives us is for learning, and specifically for learning from our mistakes. The word mistake is a little bit of a misnomer. If you've baked any bread at all, you are familiar that making "mistakes" or ending up with a finished product that is maybe not exactly what you had in your mind is part of the process. It happens every single time. Having baked for 10 years, I can say that the reason that this happens is that the vision that you have continues to evolve as you continue to learn.

Imperfect Bread

With almost every bake in my bakery there are loaves that I pull from the oven and notice the way one is a little bit asymmetrical, or one a little bit too dark. One is baked really perfectly except for that corner. Perhaps I went a little bit too deep while slashing another one or the angle of my blade wasn't just right. Or that one had a lot of oven spring and another one barely had any oven spring.

In the Business of Bread

At this point I'm not making every loaf. I've got a team of 10 people, so I'm not ushering every single loaf from beginning to very end. Every loaf that we make at our bakery is very much a team effort. Ultimately, I consider myself responsible for every loaf of bread that comes out of our oven. Often something that I can learn from the bread is where I can do a better job being a leader, mentor, coach, teacher.

I know that lots of bakers, even if you're not trying to make a go of it professionally, take it personally. Bread has a way of reaching into us and grabbing onto something deep. And so we fall in love with it. And so we read a lot of meaning into each loaf. And I think I was no exception to that.

In the early days of baking alone, but also in the early days of this business, I took each loaf as a sort of representation of my own worth. And so when it was flawed (which they all are) it was very hard for me. It was challenging to see my flaws manifested in these objects. I think what's happened over the years is I think I've gained compassion for the bread, and for myself, and for the members of my team, and for the farmers that grow the grain, and for the millers and distributors who deliver our grain, and for our customers who eat the bread, and for the chefs who we work with who serve our bread in their restaurant.

The more we see bread as an opportunity to increase our own compassion, the more compassionate people we can be, and the better our bread becomes. And we're able to enjoy it more. And we become better bakers. So it's just a net positive all around.

Opportunities

Today I'm going to talk a little bit about some of the opportunities and about some of the pitfalls of these opportunities.

Nourishment

This first is an opportunity for *nourishment*. Especially in this time when we have not been spending a lot of physical time together, I think (and I'm happy to have you disagree with me) the number of our relationships have probably decreased, and the depth of them have increased. That's at least been my experience. If you're social distancing (which you all should be, and which I think most of us are), the number of people that you spend time with is drastically less than it used to be.

As America fell in love with bread baking a few months back, it really warmed my heart to see it. I heard from so many people who were falling in love with bread for the first time. And I considered it a privilege to be able to aid some people in the beginning of their journey. The main thing that I tried to remind people of is that bread is meant for eating. It is an opportunity for nourishment.

Nourishment vs. the Crumb Shot

There can be a tendency, made more so by social media, toward the fascination and obsession with the aesthetics of the bread. I'll never forget the time I was visiting with my mentor Dave Miller in Chico, California. I took one of his loaves of bread, and I cut into it a cross-section. I was taking a picture of it and he came over and asked: "What are you doing, Josey?" I told him I was taking a "crumb shot" photo for Instagram. He didn't know what that was.

I explained to him that it's a whole thing: people take pictures of the insides of their bread, and that picture is known as a "crumb shot." It's a whole world. His response: "Why would you care about that?" And that's a good question actually. Why would we care about that?

In that moment, he broke the spell that crumb shot culture had over me. He just cares how the bread tastes. Obviously, that's what we should be caring about, how the bread tastes. But you can't taste bread over Instagram. You've got to share something. You've got to share a pretty picture.

I'm not arguing against the aesthetics of bread. Bread is a creative, artistic pursuit that is a physical object. I have very particular aesthetic goals that I go for. However, they do have to be held in balance with the fact that this is a food. This is a basic food that has been made by humans for thousands of years. A few hours or a few days later, that thing is not going to exist. And at that point, what the hole structure looked like is irrelevant.

Now, you can judge certain things by what's happening in visually in the crumb. You can judge the hydration. You can judge how well it was proofed, how well it was shaped, how well it was baked. All of those things are important and relevant. The deeper you get into it, the more specific your goals get around those things. And we always need to be connecting them back to the eating, to the *nourishing* quality of the bread.

For example, I prefer to eat bread that is mostly whole grain. That's my own personal preference. I like the way it tastes. I like the way it feels. I like the way it makes my body feel. I like the way it looks. I like everything about it. It was an important process for me to talk about the crumb shot in the social media world. It was a process for me to realize that the type of bread that I wanted to make wasn't exactly the one that would have the most popular crumb shot. The bread I like is mostly whole grain or 100% whole grain. The most popular crumb shot is a white bread: a very white bread with huge holes. After that I felt like a rebel when I was posting my whole grain crumb shots. I remember thinking "I'm not posting that. I'm not fitting into the mold. You've got a wild one on your hands here."

Who eats the bread?

Another thing that we have to consider when making bread is: *Who's eating the bread?* I consider myself very fortunate to be in the time and place that I am. I'm able to make a successful business out of making the type of bread that I'm interested in. I've thought many times about how, if I was in a different place, that might not have been the case. I've heard this from bakers around the country, they tried making whole grain bread and it was good. But nobody wanted it.

It's one thing if you're just baking from home, baking for your friends and neighbors. You have a lot more leeway there. But if you try to make a business out of baking bread, what other people want is a very real consideration that you cannot ignore. You can have your own values and morals around it, but you've got to pay the bills. If you make the best bread in the world that fits precisely with all of your values and nobody buys it, you're not going to be in business for very long.

Opening Minds + Palates

Similarly, I think there is also the opportunity on behalf of the baker to *open people's eyes, minds, palates, to things that they might think they don't like*. Many times their aversion to something is because they've had bad experiences with a version of it, which is why, in the early days, we actually didn't advertise that our bread was whole

grain or whole wheat. Because in the States ten years ago (though this is much less the case now than), most whole-wheat bread sucked. I mean, frankly, most bread sucks. Calling it bread is even a stretch. It's mass produced. It's made to sit on a shelf for as long as possible. It's not really fermented. It's not made with flour that has any character, nutrition. It's not made with enough water. And if it's whole wheat, which is an unregulated term, it's made by some Frankenstein process that maybe includes half whole wheat that most likely was rancid. I'm really tearing down the industrial bread complex. I hope that the head of Pepperidge Farms isn't reading.

Observation

Bread also provides an opportunity for *observation*, which is one of the things that I absolutely love about bread.

Practice Science

Before I was a bread baker, I was a science educator. I developed elementary and middle school science curriculum. I'm a fan of the scientific process.

One of the reasons I fell in love with bread is because it gives us an opportunity to *practice science* every single time. And I mean that in the basic sense: I'm in control of the variables. I go through a series of steps. I watch very closely for what happens and I'm able to connect cause and effect. When you're first learning how to bake, it's kind of overwhelming. Everything's new.

Frankly, I baked for months professionally without ever taking the temperature of anything. Some of you might be bakers thinking: "I don't take the temperature either." That's fine. Don't worry about it. At some point, you'll start taking the temperature of things: of the room, of the flour, of the dough. When you do, you start connecting the cause and effect of variables: how when things are warmer, fermentation happens faster at every step in the process. Fermentation can change at different temperature ranges.

Cause + Effect

Bread baking is such an amazing opportunity to notice that *cause and effect connection*. An opportunity for the observation, evidence gathering, and hypothesis making process. That is, I think one of the things that I love about it is that it's as close to as you are going to be to being objective. For example, you might notice it's 82 degrees and the dough has been fermenting for 42 minutes. These numbers are just numbers, period.

The Fantastical + Subjective

Of course, there is a whole bunch of other stuff — the mysterious, spiritual, creative, artistic side to the process — which I also love about bread baking. But with these aspects it is a little harder to pin down exactly what's going on. And they are also subjective. People taste things differently, they have different ideals, they prioritize different things. Part of the beauty of being a baker is that you get to bring together this science and this art into a single process and a delicious product.

Patience

One of the things that made me fall in love with bread at the very beginning was the fact that it presented me with the opportunity for *patience*. Before I started bread baking, I was confused about what I was going to do next professionally. I made a list of the characteristics I thought I would find fulfilling in my next thing. I didn't know what my next thing was going to be. I thought it would be great if it gave me an opportunity to practice patience. Because I'm not very patient. I have a hunch I would be a better person if I were more patient. I have a hunch that I would be able to appreciate the present more if I were more patient, that I would be able to be a better friend if I were more patient, that I would be more compassionate with myself if I was more patient.

With bread baking, in a very concrete way, part of my job was to wait. There is nothing to do. You have to wait for the process of fermentation to run its course. All of the best loaves that I've baked were made over the course of a couple of days. The life of that loaf starts 24 to 48 hours before it's a finished loaf of bread. I loved that from the very beginning. There's a lot of cultural pressure to capitalize on every moment, to maximize, to economize. It's a very American perspective and an intrinsically harmful, disrespectful, and insensitive perspective.

Once you interact with bread, it lets you know right away: “Hey, just so you know, if you want to talk with me, if you want to dance with me, you're going to have to learn how to slow down.” I think it's one of the more powerful things that bread has taught me: the importance of slowing down and fostering that patience in myself.

Generosity

Last of all is the opportunity for *generosity*, which is fundamental to bread. Most loaves of bread are large enough to feed more than one person in one meal. I don't think that's a coincidence. I think bread has played such a critical role in humanity

since we discovered it — or since it revealed itself to us — because of the way that it brings people together. Because, in its essence, bread is something that is meant to be consumed by more than one person.

The Lessons of Baking Bread

I couldn't have put any of these lessons into words when I first started baking. In hindsight, I can see what baking was doing to me. Its why I love it. When I first started baking and made that very first loaf, I went through the steps of the process and though it was cool. It was an interesting blend of science and craft. I measured these ingredients to very precise amounts and took really careful observations. At the same time, I could tell there was something involved that I couldn't quite put my finger on, and some sort of mysterious component that was very intriguing, a venue for expression and creativity.

I think the nourishment piece is directly connected to the generosity piece, Bread isn't just nourishing for ourselves, It's nourishing for communities, our friends, our families, and strangers.

It felt amazing to be able to share, to have this contribution, to be able to bring this offering that I had created through this mysterious alchemical process. And right away I became the person who would bring a loaf. I'm sure a lot of you have experienced this. You bring a homemade loaf of bread to your friend's house. You drop it off on your neighbor's doorstep. It is magical. And people respond to it like it's magic.