The Bread

Bread making seems a simple task. One might naively believe that it is merely a repeated and almost magical interaction between the heat and the dough. However, in the bread-making process there is a special relationship between the various natural products and the baker who uses them skilfully. We have only to consider the care that must be given in regulating the heat, selecting the ingredients, and using the correct handling techniques. All the older women who have been baking all their lives, and continue to do so, constantly reminded us throughout our study that baking a successful batch of bread is almost an art. Bread, that "sacred" food of our ancestors, that "food rolled into a ball, full of air holes, lopsided, sour or sweet, oval or round, soft or hard, black or white, that staff of life"[1] remains a subject of great interest.

We shall study, step by step, the procedure for making this precious food, examining the different flours and leavening agents used and the various types of bread that result. We shall attempt to explain the difference between the so-called *habitant* bread and the bread we use today, which one of our informants says tastes little better than whitewash.[2]

Bread making, or the practical knowledge of how to transform flour into bread, can be divided into well-defined phases. These are the kneading of the dough, the fermentation or rising of the dough, and, finally, the baking that produces the actual bread and turns the loaves a golden colour. Flour, yeast, water, salt, fat, and sometimes sugar are the main ingredients. We will remain faithful to the recipes of our informants, who have produced this staple food countless times. We will also refer occasionally to two important works published by the Quebec Department of Agriculture, *La grande erreur du pain blanc*, published in 1916,[3] and *Le pain de ménage*, published in 1934, with a new edition in 1940.[4] The first of these pamphlets points out the harmful consequences of not using natural bread and advocates its return. The second attempts to encourage "more actively the campaign already under way to promote the use of home-grown flour and the baking of bread in the home".[5] It also encourages greater self-sufficiency on the farm: "This campaign . . . is a very timely one, since the current depression forces everyone to make the most of everything in order to make ends meet."[6] It is therefore not surprising to find instructions for constructing clay and brick ovens, as well as a number of recipes.

Grains and Flours

Flour is the prime ingredient for making bread. Its texture, lightness, and colour indicate the quality of the bread that can be made from it. Rural people used all types of flour. The choice depended on many factors—the region in question, the soil, the climate, periods of economic crisis, blights that destroyed the harvests, and, more recently, the influence of advertising that urged people to use the well-known white flour made available by the new industrial processes.

If we look at the history of New France, we can grasp the impact of the need for bread-making flour on the survival of the people and on the economy of the times. The importance of flour is reflected in the obligations of the Compagnie des Cent-Associés with respect to the distribution of wheat to the first colonists: "Wheat was the most indispensable element of life. This was true for all the French people of that time. Bread was the very basis of their nutrition."[7] Wheat was regarded as the grain that would give people the energy they required. Jean Hamelin, in his study entitled *Économie et Société en Nouvelle-France*, points out the prime importance of wheat to the colony:

> The crucial role of wheat can be explained by the fact that Canadians of the time, together with their brothers in France, were great consumers of bread. "Each labourer", writes the author of the *Relation* of 1636, "eats two six- or seven-pound loaves a week." Raudot maintained in 1716 that "the colonist consumes two pounds of bread and six ounces of lard per day." Bread is therefore the most fundamental element on which the nutrition of the people is based.[8]

At first, "wooden or stone mortars were used"[9] to mill this grain, but gradually flour mills were introduced. In 1685, there were 41 flour mills in all of Canada, but by 1734 the number had reached 118.[10] Even though wheat seems to have been the preferred grain for making bread in past centuries, it is clear that in periods of scarcity and poor harvests the French pioneers must certainly have used other grains to make their flour. Originally they had all come from a country where other grains had long been used: "With regard to grains, wheat is always the best, followed by mixed wheat and rye, then rye and barley, and finally oats, peas, and vetch."[11] This quotation indicates that the first colonists must have turned to grains other than wheat to make flour for their bread. For example, if we look at the period preceding the British conquest, we find that a famine forced the people to take advantage of what little they had: "22 November 1756 . . . Since it has been a very bad year, we are mixing peas with the flour to make the bread, a quart of peas to a quart of flour."[12] The following quotation removes any possible doubt: "The poor farmers ate bread made of pea flour, a supremely indigestible kind of food."[13] We should also note that, around 1850, bread made of barley flour was used in the Saguenay:

> The fertility of the country around lac Saint-Jean is seen in the fact that in Chicoutimi a farmer ate barley bread made from the year's harvest.[14]

The cook carefully watches for signs
that it is time to begin the baking
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Agility and skill are required to manipulate the long-handled tools
Public Archives of Canada, no. C-21270

In the twentieth century, there is a wide variety of crops suitable for making bread—wheat, barley, rye, buckwheat, oats, corn, and certain types of beans.

Wheat is the ideal grain because it contains "all the major food components, including starch, albumin, fats, and minerals."[15] Not all Quebec farmers grow wheat. In some regions the growing season is too short, and in others wheat will not grow at all. It is important to select the right grain:

> Only two varieties of wheat can be grown here with any success. They not only ripen early, but also have good baking qualities. They are as follows: 1—Marquis wheat: productive, fairly early, excellent baking qualities; . . . 2—Garnet wheat: productive, very early . . . good baking qualities. . . . It is suitable for northern regions.[16]

Some of our informants frequently recalled the way things used to be. They grew the wheat and then milled the grain to obtain *habitant* flour for making whole-wheat bread. They insisted on their preference for wheat flour. With it they made *habitant* bread, highly nutritious, brown in colour, with an almond-like flavour. The quality of wheat flour had deteriorated with the progressive development of milling techniques, from the original millstone method to the more modern mills using new industrial processes in the second half of the nineteeth century. The mills quickly succumbed to industrialization; the old millstones were put away to make room for metal rollers. The quality of the flour gradually degenerated, ushering in the era of the infamous white bread.[17] Brown whole-wheat flour gave way to white flour, which was considered to be a "nutritional mistake". White flour replaced "whole and unsifted flour, [which] has few nutrients, lacks minerals, phosphorus, and digestible wheats, and, moreover, is constipating".[18] Nevertheless, pure whole-wheat flour went out of general use.

However, wheat was not the only grain to produce bread-making flour. Milled barley was often used for family needs, especially when the stocks of wheat had run out.[19] This grain needed more milling than wheat and produced a black bread that was chewy and tough.[20]

Rye is easier to cultivate than wheat and grows quickly. It produces a brown, heavy bread that is more difficult to digest.[21] Sometimes a mixture of wheat flour and rye flour was used in order to make the wheat flour last longer, especially when the family was large and there was not enough wheat flour from the last harvest. There were other reasons for adding rye:

> Frequently a small amount of rye is added to wheat flour for two reasons: 1—It is believed that this keeps the bread fresh longer. 2—The rye gives a special flavour to the bread.[22]

Buckwheat was also milled to obtain the gluten. People cultivated this black wheat, which grew in most soils and in almost all climates. Buckwheat flour satisfied many tastes, though it was more compact than wheat flour and browner and more dense as well. It produced a heavy bread, one that was very chewy, with very small air holes that looked as black as the grain itself.[23]

A number of our informants spoke of oat flour, but since this grain gives too much bran, its use was rather restricted. The people of Saint-Justin made a mixture of wheat and corn: "The bread is made from wheat flour to which a little corn flour is sometimes added to make the bread more crumbly."[24] We were also told of the use of a kind of bean that was ground up for making bread.[25]

Finally, we wish to stress that the quality of the flour is extremely important:

> The baking quality of wheat depends upon the ability of the dough to trap the gas resulting from fermentation. This property depends upon the gluten. Not all grains are of equal baking quality. Grains that are good for making porridge, such as sorghum, buckwheat, corn, oats and rice, are poor in gluten and produce a very heavy bread. Rye produces flour that can be used for making bread, but it is inferior to wheat flour. . . . Wheat is the very best grain for making bread.[26]

To sum up, we can say that, for the past century and longer, the use of bread-making flours in French-Canadian kitchens is related to such diverse factors as climate, the type of soil, the standard of living, the particular tastes of country people, and the advertising to promote the use of white flour.

Leavening Agents

Since the fermentation process is of prime importance in bread making, it is necessary to describe the leaven, the ingredient that activates the dough and makes it ready for baking. First, what does "rising", or fermentation, mean and what is its role? The answer to this will help us to understand certain facts. Fermentation "involves a process that changes the starch into dextrin, the dextrin into glucose, and the glucose in turn into alcohol and carbon dioxide. It is the release of numerous bubbles of carbon dioxide that makes the dough rise and creates air holes in the bread."[27] This reaction is caused by the use of certain leavening agents.

The familiar commercially prepared yeast that appeared in the early part of the twentieth century supplanted domestic leavens by ensuring uniformly good results. With the increased use of this yeast many of the old secrets were forgotten, so that today it is not an easy matter to trace information on the almost magic formulas for the leavens used by pioneers. We did manage to track down a few rare places where the old recipes had continued to be handed down and used even after the introduction of commercial leavens. A number of those interviewed spoke to us on the subject, and various older as well as more recent documents answered other questions that occurred to us.

The first colonists who settled in New France created their leavens from the cooking techniques used in the mother country. Certain similarities between the old leavens, which were used before the advent of the yeast cake, and the leavens made in French kitchens in the eighteenth century help us to interpret our findings. Leaven "is merely raw dough that

has been kept for seven or eight days and has gone sour. . . . This leaven is normally taken from the dough of the last batch of bread made, and is composed of either wheat, mixed wheat, and rye, or some other type of bread that is being prepared; it is a piece of raw dough, weighing about a pound, that ferments as it turns sour; as it does this it causes the dough with which it is combined to rise as well."[28] This old French procedure left its mark on domestic culinary practices, and we were able to uncover evidence of its influence during our study. In his history of bread, Jacques Rousseau made some very apt observations on the leaven, which he defines as "a sourdough added to fresh dough during the kneading process".[29]

The process is a simple one. The flours used for bread making contain a varying percentage of gluten, a substance that helps bread to rise. Even before the appearance of commercial yeast, therefore, it was possible to make the dough rise to the appropriate degree because of the properties of this gluten. Nevertheless, one still had to be a good baker to use the correct quantities and to choose the grain with the greatest amount of gluten.

The old ways are still keenly remembered by some of our informants. Before the commercial yeast cake arrived on the market, women kept a little raw dough from the last batch of bread and left it to sour in a small container placed near the ceiling beams in the kitchen, where it was warm. Some of them would allow this piece of dough to dry in a corner of the dough box. The dough would ferment and develop new strength for the next batch of bread. After five to eight days, this ball of dough would be soaked in lightly salted water; it would then come apart easily. A little flour would be added, and the whole would be incorporated into the new dough, thus expanding it. Occasionally this ball of dough would be borrowed by the neighbours when they had forgotten to keep back some dough from the last baking, or when there was not enough leaven for the number of loaves to be made. This exchange of leaven would provide an opportunity for friendly visits between neighbours.[30]

Our informants were not the only ones to speak of this cooking technique. A number of French-Canadian authors writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries refer to it. Briefly, this is what we found: "Once the dough is made (that is, when the flour is mixed with water), a small part of it is removed and kept aside. This is allowed to ferment for a night and a day, by which time it has become leaven; it is then used in the next day's dough."[31] Closer to our own time, Eugénie Paré wrote in 1940: "In the old days, they used to make bread with a dough leaven."[32]

Sourdough was not the only leaven used. The early pioneers were quick to take advantage of the natural substances available to them. Consequently, hops and potatoes played a significant role. Hops have long been used to flavour beer. According to Jacques Rousseau, they have been known since antiquity and were introduced to New France when it was first settled. Since the sixteenth century they have been used "as a seasoning for bread, not directly, but added to the leaven as an

infusion".[33] The hop is a hardy plant that grows easily and acts as a leavening agent. The pioneers made a "stock" using the flowers and leaves of the plant. Usually, the leaven was soaked overnight. Some people prepared it in a wooden tub that was also used for keeping butter,[34] while others made it in a special container commonly called the "stock jug", or kept it warm in a corner of the dough box reserved especially for the leaven.[35] The recipes we gathered revealed several regional variations. Very often, the leaves and flowers of the hops would be dipped in boiling water, wheat flour would be added to the resulting liquid, and the mixture would then be left to sour.[36] Sometimes water in which potatoes were boiled would be added to this mixture to make it stronger.[37]

Gradually, potatoes were added to the mixture of hops and flour. Because of its high starch content, the potato was used for its catalytic effect on the action of the leaven, which causes the lump of dough to rise. Boiled potatoes, finely mashed with or without the peel, or raw potatoes, thinly sliced or grated, were used. Some of our informants even used the potato leaven alone. They would boil the potatoes in their skins, mash them, and then let them sour and dry out. A type of mould would develop. When the time came to use this leaven, they would soak it for twelve hours in a tightly closed container.[38] Others would add to the potato mixture either sour milk or a little flour, water, and sugar.[39] The potato leaven would often be combined with hops, since this mixture gave better results. Usually, boiling potato water would be poured over the hop flowers and leaves and left to steep. The potatoes would be mashed thoroughly, with or without their skins, and the previously prepared stock would be poured over them. It was thickened with a little flour and lightly seasoned with salt and sugar. Sometimes molasses would be substituted for sugar as it activated the fermentation just as well. Some cooks would dip the hops into molasses before adding the other ingredients.[40] One of our informants volunteered the following information:

> Before the appearance of commercial yeast, our grandmothers used hops boiled up with potatoes. Once this preparation had been mashed and strained, a little flour was added to make the dough; this was then divided up into little cakes and dried, without cooking, to be used for the next baking sessions. It is believed that people referred to this mixture when they said they were going to borrow some leaven.[41]

Sometimes this leaven was used in a different form. The women would lend each other a bottle containing a liquid leaven consisting of the juice of boiled potatoes, hops, and water. When they had used part of this liquid, they immediately added some more water, and in this way the leaven was replenished in the time-honoured "stock jug". During the warmer weather, children were sent all over the countryside to borrow this mixture. Those were the good old days of the "jug of leaven".[42]

The use of the potato was to continue in the home. Even with the arrival of commercial yeasts it would be used as an aid in the rising process, and today it is still used by some cooks, who mix it in with their dough as "it makes it rise better and gives the bread a better taste."[43]

In addition to these various leavens, we also discovered the use of a certain type of buckwheat cake with fermentative properties. This was a very rudimentary leaven consisting of a mixture of buckwheat flour and a little water. These little cakes were dried by hanging them from the kitchen ceiling beams. Before each baking, two cakes were soaked in water together with some flour.[44]

It seems clear that the practical knowledge of the pioneers was more than adequate. They knew how to make the most of even the smallest gifts of nature.

The beginning of the twentieth century, however, marked a turning point in culinary techniques. About seventy years ago commercial yeast cakes appeared on the market, made possible by the advances in culinary chemistry. But was this really progress, or simply a necessary corrective measure? The sequence of events suggests that there is a direct relationship between the production of commercial leaven and the use of the new roller mills, which reduced the quality of flour. In the case of sourdough leaven, among others, we know that fermentation occurred naturally and could be put to use because of the elasticity provided by the gluten in the flour. As long as the flour retained its natural yeasts and gluten, the old homemade leavens could be used successfully. Repeated failures with the new flours, however, might have made it necessary to produce a new kind of leaven. This theory is held by some authors. We know that gluten helps dough to rise and that the percentage of gluten in flour varies. If the flour is stone-ground, almost none of its baking quality is lost. On the other hand, if roller mills are used, the grain loses some of its components, including its leavening agents. "The roller mills eliminate the leaven."[45] Moreover, "the low gluten content of commercial flours is one of the objections to roller milling."[46] Eugénie Paré adds: "Flours low in gluten produce a dough that is more likely to lie down than to rise."[47]

If the flour is of poor quality, it cannot be expected to perform well. Once its percentage of gluten is decreased and its leaven destroyed, there is no alternative but to use stronger leavening agents. The incompatibilities between technical developments and domestic practices at the beginning of the twentieth century led to the appearance of commercial yeasts.

The first yeast cakes to appear on the market were round, and they were followed a few years later by square cakes. According to our informants, these little dried lumps of yeast contained a well-proportioned mixture of hops, potatoes, and malt extract.[48] The brand name Royal was undoubtedly the most popular. The next development was yeast in block form, which could be bought from the baker. And finally came the powdered yeast we use today, which can be purchased in little packages.

Preparing the yeast cake was definitely easier and more reliable. The day before the baking was to be done, two or three cakes were soaked in warm water, together with a pinch of salt and some sugar; about two hours later, after the sugar and salt had dissolved, the mixture was thickened a little with flour, allowed to rise slightly, and a little more water and flour were added. Occasionally this leaven would be reinforced with

two or three boiled and mashed potatoes. It was believed that potatoes helped the bread retain its moisture.[49] The use of potatoes was optional, however, as was the addition of fat. Some of our informants had pleasant memories of the preparation of the yeast cake. Here is what one of them had to say about it:

> At suppertime my mother prepared two Royal cakes with water, sugar, salt, four or five mashed potatoes, and the water used to boil them in. When she had mixed everything together, and the sugar and salt had dissolved, she added a little flour before going to bed. This was left to rise overnight.[50]

In some homes, the container holding the leaven was placed on top of the hot-water tank on the wood stove to keep it at the correct temperature all night long. The yeast cake enjoyed widespread popularity and was even used by amateur beer-makers, who used it to improve their home brew.[51]

Preparing the Dough

The bread is made in the dough box,[52] a large wooden container with a lid; it is slightly narrower at the bottom than at the top and rests on four legs. It may be made of pine, cherry, or fir. The dough box was used for a very long time, and was kept in the kitchen even after the appearance of kneading machines. The most common model is divided into two sections inside, one used for keeping the leaven in and the other the flour.[53] However, a bin with a single trough is also often used. In some places we found a type of "table-trough", a sort of box on legs with a tray-like round cover that can be leaned against the wall. After the dough is kneaded, the tray is flipped down, and the top can be used as a dining table.[54] Along similar lines, there is the "baker's chair", equipped with arms and a backrest that, when lowered, forms a kneading table; with the back raised it becomes a very useful piece of furniture in the home.[55] Some dough boxes are equipped with a small drawer in which the dough leaven is left to sour. Occasionally, at the bottom of these containers, there is a closed cupboard where the batch of baked bread can be stored.[56] These variations of the dough box continued to be used until the arrival of kneading machines at the beginning of the twentieth century. The new blade-equipped devices made the task of kneading easier and saved precious time as well. There are various models available, some operated manually, others electrically powered.

With this great variety of technical aids, baking bread remains a subject of considerable interest. The transformation of flour, water, and leaven has always held a fascination for people, even for those who are bakers by trade and who are the only ones to be happy when they are *dans le pétrin*.[57]* A brief look at the traditional method of baking will enable us to better appreciate the work that goes into a successful batch and the laborious nature of this household chore. Incidentally, the dough was always blessed by making the sign of the cross over it.[58]

*Translator's note: This is a play on words. The French expression means "to be in trouble", but its literal sense is "to be in the dough box".

-ailure to keep a close watch over the
state of the dough and the temperature
of the oven can be disastrous
Marius Barbeau Collection,
NMC 83536

The first step is to prepare the leaven. Next, some flour and a pinch of salt are put in the dough box, which is placed near the stove in winter in order to warm up the flour slightly. When the leaven and flour are ready, an indentation is made in the flour and the leaven is poured in. Then, with her fingers, the baker carefully incorporates some flour into the leaven, taking care not to "smother" the mixture. A little warm water is gradually added until a firm consistency is obtained; care must be taken not to "drown the dough".[59] The dough is lifted up lightly and worked in the dough box in a figure-eight pattern. In this way, air is incorporated into the dough, which gradually swells in size. The dough is kneaded until it no longer sticks, and is uniform and elastic. It is then left to rise for the first time for about an hour. It is kneaded once again and left to rise a second time to its full capacity, that is, to double its volume. Finally, the dough is placed on the lightly floured working surface of the dough box and is kneaded with the palms of the hands until it makes a squeaking sound.

The last step is to turn it and shape it into loaves. It rises again for the last time until ready to be put into the oven.

Throughout these operations it is of the utmost importance to avoid any drafts and to maintain a constant temperature in the room. "I remember when Dad had finished working the dough, he would make a little sign of the cross over it, and cover it up carefully so that it would not catch cold (very important so that the yeast keeps its full strength)."[60] In winter, it is necessary to compensate for the cold by raising the temperature of the house; the warmer the house the faster and higher the bread rises. To speed up the process, some women placed a boiling kettle in the side of the dough box that was not being used.

When the baker had finished shaping the loaves, they would be placed either in pans greased with salt-pork rind or simply on a wooden board powdered with flour. To amuse the children, mothers would often make little dough-men or miniature loaves.[61] These would rise and bake in sardine cans or baking-powder tins, and would be placed in the oven alongside the household bread. While the dough was rising for the last time, the fire would be lighted. Everyone preferred the taste of bread baked in those old ovens to that of any other bread, and they were very willing to stand by for the correct oven temperature, keeping an eye on the dough to see that it had risen enough to put in the oven.

The baking is done year round, although during the winter it can be done every two weeks, since the bread can be kept cool and thus lasts longer than during the summer. The average size of a batch varies from fifteen to twenty-four loaves; it all depends on the number of mouths to feed. The morning is spent preparing the dough, and the bread is baked in the afternoon. Often, when the mother was pregnant or when the winter was too cold, this lengthy preparation was the responsibility of the father. Many wives were very proud of their husbands' talent for kneading the dough. Because of their physical strength, some men were even more skilful than the women at softening the dough and making it rise.[62]

Preparing the Oven

As mentioned above, when the dough is rising for the last time a fire is laid in the oven. This task is almost a ritual and is performed in a festive atmosphere, with the whole family participating.

The oven is heated with special wood that is cut to fit the length of the hearth to ensure an even distribution of heat. It is dry wood, cut very thin. Cedar is the first choice because it burns quickly; failing this, dry pine, spruce, good branches of balsam fir, aspen, driftwood, small logs, or whatever is available is used. This wood is always stacked near the oven, and no one is allowed to touch it. About fifteen pieces are usually required for a good fire, and two fires are the general rule. The wood is crisscrossed over the whole surface of the hearth. For the first fire, it might be placed near the doors and then pushed to the back of the oven to make room for the second fire.[63] The wood is laid out to form a cage or lattice, or it may be positioned like a pyramid or tent. These various ways of laying the fire

provide better air circulation, and make the fire draw well. Small pieces of dried bark are placed between the logs.

The mother, father, or eldest child lights the bark that gradually spreads the fire through the wood. The doors are left wide open for ventilation. The flame plays along the walls of the dome and heats them, while heating the hearth at the same time. The fire cracks, hisses, and spreads from one piece of wood to the next[64] as the oven roars and belches black smoke. The wood crackles and finally settles into mounds of burning embers, which are left to cool down.

A fire rake is used to spread out the embers on the hearth. The doors and air holes are closed to allow the heat to penetrate into the walls and recesses of the oven. If the oven is equipped with a small opening at the rear, this is stopped up with a wooden plug. The heating process lasts about an hour and a half. A special tool is used to remove the embers from the oven, and they are then thrown into an old bucket and extinguished. Sometimes the embers are spread out at the sides, the back, or the front of the oven, if the correct temperature has not been attained. Sometimes they are left in the oven during the baking.[65]

A variety of tried and tested methods are used to determine whether the oven has reached the right temperature. The most common is to extend the hand and forearm into the oven while counting up to a certain number, which varies from person to person—4, 10, 20, 25, or 32.[66] Each housewife has her own point of reference. If she is able to keep her arm in the oven until she reaches her number, the oven is ready. On the other hand, if she has to withdraw her arm before this, the oven is still too hot and is allowed a further period of cooling by opening the doors for a few minutes. Another test is to place a piece of newspaper in the oven and see how quickly it catches fire.[67] When the dome is white and the embers have cooled down to ash, the oven is at the correct temperature.

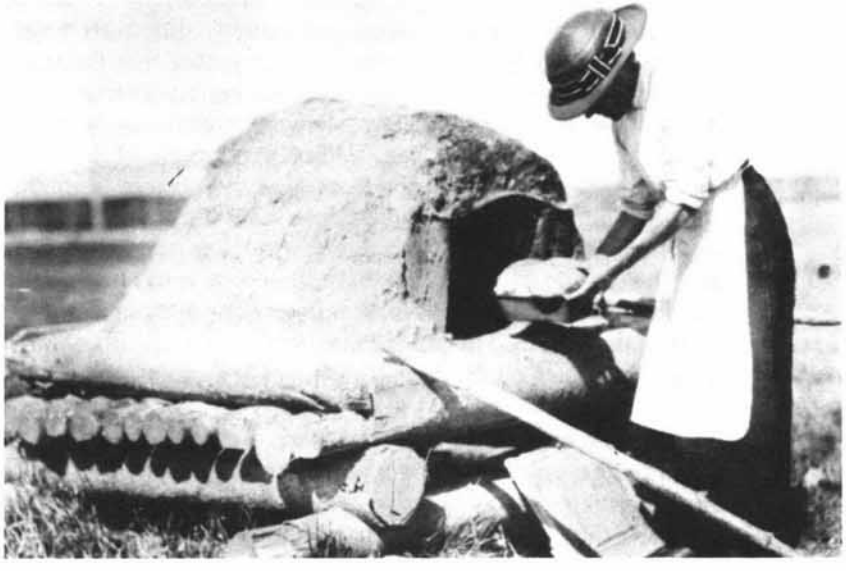
There are other ways to determine the correct temperature. If a handful of pig feed thrown on the hearth takes a while to burn, it is a sign that the moment has arrived.[68] Another way is to check both the dome and the hearth at the same time. It is possible that only the dome is ready and not the hearth. The dome must be an even white in colour. If a handful of flour is thrown on the hearth and turns golden yellow, it is a sign that it is time to put in the bread.[69]

The cook then carefully cleans out the oven and sweeps up the ashes before sending off the whole household, including the children, to bring the pans of puffed-up dough—a real procession![70] While hurrying to complete this task, they must be very careful to avoid shaking up the pans, dropping them, or touching the loaves, in case the dough falls.

Placing the Bread in the Oven

The person doing this task skilfully takes the largest loaves first and lays them side by side at the back and along the sides of the oven, taking care to leave room in the middle and near the front for the loaves cooked directly on the hearth, as well as for the children's loaves, which take less

Checking the temperature of the oven
Blanchette Collection,
NMC AC-21-73-3



Industrious hands and the heat of the
oven walls ensure a successful batch
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time to cook than the large double loaves or the round loaves. Although the task of placing the loaves in the oven is relatively easy, skill is needed in handling the implements used.

Among these implements is the fire rake, which is a long-handled wooden scraper, three inches (7.6 cm) wide. It is used for stoking the fire, spreading out the embers in the oven, and removing the ashes. It is also used occasionally for pulling the bread pans forward before taking them out of the oven.[71] The poker is a long wooden or iron pole for poking the fire and stirring up the embers.[72] The hook, an iron bar with a hook at one end, is used for latching on to the edge of the pans to remove them from the oven.[73] Finally, there is the famous baker's peel. This is a long-handled flat spatula made of light wood. Slipped under the bread pans, it is used for placing the loaves in the oven and for removing them.[74] These implements are usually stored on top of the oven. The baker must be able to handle them with skill despite their awkward length.

The action of placing the loaves in the oven can be imagined as a procession of white shapes disappearing one after the other into a fiery furnace. This scene is accompanied by the rapid movement of the arms; the oven must not be allowed to cool down or the dough will fall. The first bread pan is placed on the baker's peel and carefully lowered to hearth level; it is then inserted in the oven and slid to the back, and a quick flick of the wrist slides it off the peel. The same care is taken with each pan of bread. As soon as the double loaves and the round loaves are in place, the centre and front of the oven are filled with the bread to be cooked directly on the hearth as well as the smaller loaves.

The expression "baking on the hearth" means that the dough is placed directly on the oven floor. Baking in this manner used to be fairly common, and even in more recent times some women continued to use this method when they ran out of baking sheets or when they were unable to find all the pans, which were frequently used for other tasks once the baking was completed. The following description was given by Louis Hémon in *Maria Chapdelaine:*

> On the eve of a baking, Télesphore was sent to hunt up the bread pans, which invariably found their way into all the corners of the house and shed, being in use daily to measure oats for the horse or corn for the fowl, not to mention twenty other casual purposes they continually served.[75]

Large, deep containers of black-iron plate or tin were generally used for the double loaves, and circular containers for the round loaves. Baking was not done exclusively in pans, according to some of our informants and to various authors who recall the custom of baking on the hearth. One informant in his nineties remembered having seen his maternal grandmother baking bread on the hearth without any container.[76] In 1888, Jean-Baptiste Cloutier described the last stages in the preparation of the loaves, which were simply shaped into balls, sprinkled with flour, and left to rise in a type of trough until the baking. He adds: "Tin pans would also be used to bake the loaves",[77] and further on he describes how the loaves are put into the oven:

The loaves turn golden-brown in the heat of the oven
Blanchette Collection, NMC 74-14568

The aroma of freshly baked bread sharpens the appetite
Marius Barbeau Collection, 1936, NMC 81100

> Each loaf is then placed on a spatula dusted with coarse flour and placed in the oven. . . . The loaves slide off the peel easily, with a slight flick of the wrist. Loaves placed in baking pans do not need this precaution.[78]

This method of baking on the hearth was a favourite for a long time. It was often used when, at the last minute, no pans could be found. To bake in this manner, a thicker, firmer dough is required, or else each loaf should be worked into a longer shape.

> I myself have baked on the hearth. The dough is the same as it is for the bread pans. We used to bake the bread on the hearth when we didn't have enough pans. I kneaded my bread in the same way and left it to rise on a little board, but I shaped longer and narrower loaves. When it was time to do the baking, I carried my little board—with the bread on it—to the oven as soon as the pans containing the other loaves had been placed at the back of the oven. I swept out the opening of the oven and made sure that the hearth was clean. Then I took a loaf and squeezed it in the middle until it was almost separated into two parts. I folded one part over the other after placing it on the peel. I hit it lightly with my fist to make the two parts stick together and placed it on the hearth, using the peel and my other hand. That is all there was to it.[79]

When all the loaves are properly positioned in the oven, the children's round loaves are lined up at the door. They are put there because they are small and do not require much baking—half to three-quarters of an hour, approximately.

The doors of the oven are then closed. If the oven is too hot and the heat forms the crust too quickly, there is a danger that the bread will not rise properly and that the crust will burn. This is avoided by leaving the air holes or the door open for ventilation.[80] The bread is in the oven for an average of an hour and a half.[81] Loaves cooked in pans rise higher than those baked on the hearth, but eventually they all turn brown and puff up. The heat sets the bread, and the silence of the oven is broken only by the sound of air bubbles escaping from the dough. As she waits patiently, the cook spends the last few minutes imagining a beautiful batch of golden-brown well-shaped loaves.[82]

When the cooking time is up, she checks the colour, takes a loaf in her hands and strikes the bottom of the crust; if it makes a hollow sound, it is a sign that the baking is finished.[83]

Removing the Bread from the Oven

Everyone is on hand for the magic moment when the loaves are taken out of the oven. The aroma of freshly baked bread sharpens the appetite. With the bread hook, the pans are slid onto the peel. One by one they are removed from the pans and set on a table near the oven. To prevent the bread from falling, the loaves are carefully laid down on their sides[84] to cool[85] and dry out.[86] Some people arrange them standing on end in rows,

to let them settle.[87] Others let them dry for a few minutes in the pans and then turn them over to rest on the top crust.[88] Still others lay them out side by side in closely packed rows.

The place where the bread is kept and the containers used to keep it fresh vary from region to region. The dough box is certainly an ideal place,[89] but sometimes bread is kept in cupboards in the oven shed,[90] in the cellar,[91] in the kitchen, or in the dairy shed during the summer months.[92] Milk churns are airtight and thus keep the bread soft.[93] Apple barrels might also be used.[94] Once the oven has cooled down, it is another good place to store the bread.[95] Among some of the older people accustomed to frugal living, we heard about the practice of stringing the loaves on a skewer and drying them in the attic, thus reducing the amount eaten by the children. This practice was rather rare, however, though in some families bread was distributed only once during a meal.

Types of Bread

Country people call the staple food prepared at home in their ovens *pain de ménage*, which means "household bread", or *pain de famille*, which means "family bread"; the terms indicate their disapproval of bakery bread.

Homemade bread has numerous other names, depending on its shape and sometimes on its composition. There are, for example, double loaves (two rounds of dough pressed together), single round loaves, braided loaves, bread in the shape of a mushroom, and long loaves, not to mention *gâteau d'habitant* ("farmer's cake"), which is similar to ordinary bread but sweeter.

All the different types of bread—white, whole-wheat, bran, rye, barley, buckwheat, and aniseed-flavoured—are cooked in the same fashion.

Consumption

The large consumption of bread in Quebec families was always accompanied by a feeling of great respect. Because bread had a sacred quality about it, its distribution was surrounded by certain rituals that were scrupulously followed by the father or grandfather at the table.

The loaf of bread was placed on the table near the plate of the head of the family. Before cutting the first slice, he would give thanks to God by tracing a cross on the end of the loaf with the knife. He would then wipe the blade of the knife on the hem of his shirt, cut the bread, and distribute slices to those present, starting with oldest person at the table and ending with the youngest child. Our informants had the following comments: "While he was alive my grandfather cut the bread; before slicing it he traced a cross on it with his knife. Bread is given out to those present in order of status, starting with the oldest."[96] "The head of the household made a sign of the cross over the bread before cutting it."[97] "The father serves the bread and makes a cross on it before slicing it to

The bread oven was life itself
Marius Barbeau Collection,
NMC 81099

In a language rich in metaphor, children
are often referred to as loaves of bread
Blanchette Collection,
NMC AC-21-74-4

ensure that there will always be bread on the table. He serves the eldest first and the youngest last."[98] With very few exceptions, this custom disappeared as it became easier to obtain bread: "Today bread is easy to obtain, but at that time people had respect for it."[99]

Descriptions of these everyday rituals may be found in French-Canadian literature. Among others, Albert Laberge writes in *La Scouine*:

> With his black-handled pointed knife, Urgèle Deschamps, who was sitting at the head of the table, quickly drew a cross on the loaf that his wife, Mâço, had just taken out of the dough box. After making the sign of Redemption over the supper bread, he then began cutting slices and piling them in front of him.[100]

The custom of breaking bread does not seem to have existed. It was considered highly improper and a grave insult to the head of the house.[101]

While successful batches adorned the table, there were many different uses for those that were not successful. Loaves that were heavy or chewy were used as feed for poultry and pigs.[102] Dry bread was used for making pudding.[103] The crust of burnt bread was used in the preparation of a type of coffee greatly enjoyed by rural people: "With the crust of burnt bread, we made coffee with hot milk. This was a real treat."[104] Burnt crumbs were soaked in boiling water or mixed with roasted barley: "Roasted barley was added to the burnt breadcrumbs. Roasted barley is ground up with the burnt breadcrumbs to make a coffee-like beverage."[105] In the Lower St. Lawrence and the Gaspé regions, wine is made with the crust of burnt bread. One of our informants told us the following:

> Old people used to make wine with the crusts of burnt bread, raisins, oranges, yeast, and sugar. They left it to ferment for three weeks to a month in a pot covered with a cloth until it was ready to drink. It was something like porter. Women used to drink it for energy.[106]

Another added:

> Burnt bread would be used for making coffee, and some would make porter by adding hops, yeast, molasses, sugar, and water.[107]

Burnt crusts were also used to cure diarrhoea among the animals.[108]

Some of the common home remedies in the Gaspé region were based on the supposed medicinal properties of bread. It was recommended, for example, to drink an infusion made with bread crusts to speed up the delivery of a baby.[109] To soothe an insect bite, one was advised to "apply a poultice made of bread dough, molasses, and butter."[110]