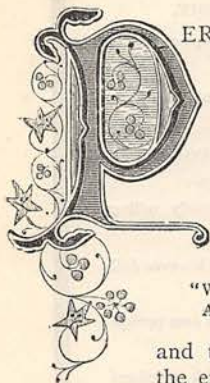


MAKING BREAD AT HOME.

BY AN AMERICAN CORRESPONDENT.



PERHAPS it will be considered that the last word has been said on the bread question; that with all which has been written on that subject no more is necessary; yet surely the last word has *not* been said until home-made bread ceases to deserve Hood's contemptuous couplet—

"Who has not met with home-made bread?—
A heavy compound of putty and lead,"

and the heavy dark-hued loaf becomes the exception, not as now the rule.

One reason, perhaps, why home-made bread is so rarely used in cities, is the idea common in England that it can only be well baked in a brick oven. I think this has more to do with the general dependence on the baker than the tempting convenience of being able to buy bread ready to eat.

Another thing to be considered is the economy, not a small matter in large families of growing children, though in economising we must always remember that even where the need of economy is most urgent, it is poor management to attain it by giving uninviting food.

Perhaps, too, I shall induce some wise housewife to try making brown bread at home (can anything be more delicious than brown bread and fresh butter?) and even to give a trial to rye-flour—how excellent an article of food this is, few people know, and they take a prejudice to it from eating or hearing of the disagreeable, sour, black rye-bread of the Continent. Rye-bread is usually heavy and very sour, but the last characteristic is not natural to rye, which has the flavour of wheat flour to which a very little sugar has been added; but the sourness is purposely produced in Germany, I am told, by the leaven, and is relished by those who are brought up on it beyond any sweet bread.

In this country, where tradition has little power to paralyse experiment, the woman was not prevented from trying to have home-made bread because she lived in a town-house with a small iron oven. Her experience is that any oven that will bake a piece of beef or a leg of mutton will bake a loaf of bread. Of course it is not necessary for comfort to have huge loaves; the half-quarter size is most convenient to cut and to bake, and people who deal with a baker use them as much as the larger size. Where the home-made loaf has a crust an inch thick, there would be very little inside it perhaps, but my bread has no such crust, nor will yours if you pay attention to my rules for baking, and make the bread as I shall direct.

In the first place, be careful to weigh and measure until you are quite familiar with the process, when your

eye will direct you; in the next, do not attempt a large baking at first, even if your family is large—it is better to bake three times a week, three loaves each time, than nine loaves at once, and in the end it is less trouble. Say you wish to make, then, two half-quarter loaves, or thereabouts, at first; you will need about three pounds of flour, or a little more—flour varies very much, but the *very best quality* of household whites is the most economical in the end—half an ounce of German yeast, a tea-spoonful of salt, and warm water.

Dissolve the yeast in half a pint of *warm* water (*not hot*, or your yeast will be scalded), then take one pound of the flour—if in winter it should be warmed and well dried—put it in a large bowl, and make a hole in the centre, in which put the salt. Add the yeast well mixed with the water, stirring it the while; add more warm water if necessary to make the pound of flour into a batter thick enough for a spoon to stand up, or as thick as porridge; beat it for a minute or so, cover it, and if in winter set it in a warm place all night. In summer it will be light by morning if set anywhere out of a draught. This is called setting the sponge. When it is quite light—that is, as porous as a honeycomb, double the bulk it was when first set, and covered all over with bubbles—your sponge is ready. Now take the remaining two pounds of flour and nearly a pint more of warm water. Let the flour be warm and dry, add it to the sponge, stirring it in with the right hand and adding enough water to make a *soft* dough; the most general fault in bread-making at home is getting the dough too stiff; bear in mind that you cannot have it *too soft*, provided it is not sticky. It should be soft enough to spread a little when turned out to knead on the board, but not to run; in kneading, if it sticks to the board, dredge a very little flour over it, and work it in, bringing the dough always from the outside to the middle. It will take about ten minutes to bring this to a smooth and very soft mass, which, though so soft, will stick neither to your hands nor the bowl. Be sure in adding flour while kneading, it is done from the dredger, not thrown in by the handful. If you have very little time, this dough may be divided into two loaves, and put into two half-quarter square-end cake tins, which cost little, and the novice in bread-making will be much aided by having them. Later, when practice has made you perfect, you may bake your bread without, or in any form you please.

The dough need not be spread evenly over the bottom of the tin, if it is the right consistency it will soon spread itself as it rises; merely when divided drop it in; the tin should not be more than half full; if it is, take off so much dough as will leave it about half full *when spread*. Now set them to rise with a cloth over them in a warm place—not in front of the fire; the warmth should come from beneath.

In thus putting the bread in the pans after once

kneading, I am giving only the simplest and most expeditious plan; and the result of it will be a very excellent loaf; but where one can give a reasonable amount of time and care to the work, it is best to work the bread twice, which is my own way. After the dough is well kneaded, as before directed, instead of putting it in the pans at once, set in the mixing bowl to rise; when it is twice the bulk it was, knead it down thoroughly with both hands, for seven to ten minutes; now divide it, and put it in the tins to rise; we are now again at the same point as with the first plan. The bread, kneaded either *once* or *twice* as convenience allows, is put in the pans to rise, and in the rising and baking lies the secret of success. Bread is generally put into the oven much too soon—that is, before it is sufficiently risen; the crust forms, and it is impossible for it to attain its proper bulk. Bread so treated is tough, even if porous, is dark, and shows its ill-usage by a crack along the top or round the sides—not a crack from lightness, filled up with light bread, but a cavernous crack into which you can lay your finger. If your bread looks so, before you cut it you may know it is wrong. To avoid this let your bread rise to *double the bulk* it was when first put in the tins, which will now be nearly full and feel very light to the touch; or lift a little dough aside with the finger—if it looks full of small holes like a *very fine* sponge it is ready for the oven, which must always be ready for it. To insure good bread, or cake or pastry for that matter, your oven must bake at the *bottom*.

The oven, contrary to the general opinion, should be quite hot, so hot that when you hold in your hand you can count twenty with ease, but at thirty be forced to draw it out. Then put in the loaves; do not look into the oven for twenty minutes, then change the position of the loaves if they are beginning to brown, open the damper for five minutes, then close it; in half an hour the bread should begin to colour, and in an hour the loaves will be done. Turn them out on a cloth and tap the bottom. It should be pale brown, feel crisp, and smell cooked. Now stand the bread up against something as you would toast to prevent it steaming. If your oven was very hot, say if you could only bear your hand in it while you counted twenty (if you could not bear it so long, it was too hot, and must be cooled before the bread is put in), the bread may be taken out after it has been in three-quarters of an hour, and the bottom tested as before; the bread will no doubt be done; if the bottom, however, is still soft and not brown, return it to the tin, and bake another quarter of an hour. If your oven "catches" at the top before the bottom browns, cover the bread for the first half-hour with a stout piece of cardboard.

The idea of long slow baking has come from the days of brick ovens, no doubt, when huge two-quartern loaves were baked that they might keep fresh; because, as a fire had to be expressly built for baking, the trouble was taken not more than once a week; and these great loaves, of course, could only be very slowly baked, or they would have been raw in the middle.

But now-a-days, when we know that the oven if properly managed is ready whenever there is fire enough to roast a leg of mutton, that it takes five minutes over-night to set the sponge, and a quarter of an hour next morning to make the bread, there is surely no reason why the baking should be a huge task left for one day in the week; for, it must be remembered, the large weekly baking consumes all at once quadruple the time needed for each smaller one; three or four pounds of flour can be kneaded thoroughly in a few minutes, its bulk is so small, but not so twelve or sixteen pounds.

I have given the quantity needed three times a week for a *very* small family, a *jeune ménage* perhaps, because if you fail, it is better to fail after less labour and loss than much, and you must try again; and once a quartern of light, white, crisp bread is produced, you can make two by doubling everything. Four tins will not easily go into a small oven, though three perhaps will, two lengthwise and one across; try them, and if one loaf or two must be left to bake after, put so many as your oven will bake (*on the bottom*) to rise as directed, put the others in a less warm place, approaching them to the warmer spot when the other loaves go into the oven. This requires only a little management; I know one mother of a family of ten hearty children, who bakes her own bread, eight loaves at a time, in a little oven that just holds three; her bread is excellent, and never sour, which of course it would be if she did not manage so that each three loaves are just ready as soon as the previous three are baked (if all had risen at once, those having to wait would be sour and tasteless; and bad as bread is which has not risen enough, bread too far risen is much worse). The economy is so great and so necessary that she finds it pay to take this trouble.

Never attempt to bake bread on the top shelf of the oven; it will always be spoilt; therefore, though the top is empty, and your loaves waiting, let them wait.

Remember a few things, and your bread must be good:—The best—therefore the cheapest—flour, a hot oven, and sufficient time to rise. As flour and yeast differ so much, I can give no rule for time, but an infallible one is for it to *double its bulk* before being put in the oven.

The quantity of yeast may be increased if it is not strong, which will be known by the length of time it takes to rise; as a rule it should not take more than three or four hours after it is made up in the morning. If you have mixed your sponge over-night as directed, and it is not light at six in the morning, set it in a warm place for two hours; if not light and bubbling then you may conclude, unless the weather is very cold, that the yeast was either stale or insufficient. Inquire where you bought it as to the quantity of bread an ounce will make.

Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte, in bread as in other things; and perfect bread once produced, the lightest rolls, twists, horns, and kringles may be made with very little trouble.

CATHERINE OWEN.

