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THE MINIMALIST; The Secret of Great Bread: Let Time Do the Work

By MARK BITTMAN

INNOVATIONS in bread baking are rare. In fact, the 6,000-year-old process hasn't changed much since Pasteur made the commercial production of standardized yeast possible in 1859. The introduction of the gas stove, the electric mixer and the food processor made the process easier, faster and more reliable.

I'm not counting sliced bread as a positive step, but Jim Lahey's method may be the greatest thing since.

This story began in late September when Mr. Lahey sent an e-mail message inviting me to attend a session of a class he was giving at Sullivan Street Bakery, which he owns, at 533 West 47th Street in Manhattan. His wording was irresistible: "I'll be teaching a truly minimalist breadmaking technique that allows people to make excellent bread at home with very little effort. The method is surprisingly simple -- I think a 4-year-old could master it -- and the results are fantastic."

I set up a time to visit Mr. Lahey, and we baked together, and the only bad news is that you cannot put your 4-year-old to work producing bread for you. The method is complicated enough that you would need a very ambitious 8-year-old. But the results are indeed fantastic.

Mr. Lahey's method is striking on several levels. It requires no kneading. (Repeat: none.) It uses no special ingredients, equipment or techniques. It takes very little effort.

It accomplishes all of this by combining a number of unusual though not unheard of features. Most notable is that you'll need about 24 hours to create a loaf; time does almost all the work. Mr. Lahey's dough uses very little yeast, a quarter teaspoon (you almost never see a recipe with less than a teaspoon), and he compensates for this tiny amount by fermenting the dough very slowly. He mixes a very wet dough, about 42 percent water, which is at the extreme high end of the range that professional bakers use to create crisp crust and large, well-structured crumb, both of which are evident in this loaf.

The dough is so sticky that you couldn't knead it if you wanted to. It is mixed in less than a minute, then sits in a covered bowl, undisturbed, for about 18 hours. It is then turned out onto a board for 15 minutes, quickly shaped (I mean in 30 seconds), and allowed to rise again, for a couple of hours. Then it's baked. That's it.

I asked Harold McGee, who is an amateur breadmaker and best known as the author of "On Food and Cooking" (Scribner, 2004), what he thought of this method. His response: "It makes sense. The long, slow rise does over hours what intensive kneading does in minutes: it brings the gluten molecules into side-by-side alignment to maximize their opportunity to bind to each other and produce a strong, elastic network. The wetness of the dough is an important piece of this because the gluten molecules are more mobile in a high proportion of water, and so can move into alignment easier and faster than if the dough were stiff."

That's as technical an explanation as I care to have, enough to validate what I already knew: Mr. Lahey's method is creative and smart.

But until this point, it's not revolutionary. Mr. McGee said he had been kneading less and less as the years have gone by, relying on time to do the work for him. Charles Van Over, author of the authoritative book on food-processor dough making, "The Best Bread Ever" (Broadway, 1997), long ago taught me to make a very wet dough (the food processor is great at this) and let it rise slowly. And, as Mr. Lahey himself notes,

"The Egyptians mixed their batches of dough with a hoe."

What makes Mr. Lahey's process revolutionary is the resulting combination of great crumb, lightness, incredible flavor -- long fermentation gives you that -- and an enviable, crackling crust, the feature of bread that most frequently separates the amateurs from the pros. My bread has often had thick, hard crusts, not at all bad, but not the kind that shatter when you bite into them. Producing those has been a bane of the amateur for years, because it requires getting moisture onto the bread as the crust develops.

To get that kind of a crust, professionals use steam-injected ovens. At home I have tried brushing the dough with water (a hassle and ineffective); spraying it (almost as ineffective and requiring frequent attention); throwing ice cubes on the floor of the oven (not good for the oven, and not far from ineffective); and filling a pot with stones and preheating it, then pouring boiling water over the stones to create a wet sauna (quite effective but dangerous, physically challenging and space-consuming). I was discouraged from using La Cloche, a covered stoneware dish, by my long-standing disinclination to crowd my kitchen with inessential items that accomplish only one chore. I was discouraged from buying a \$5,000 steam-injected oven by its price.

It turns out there's no need for any of this. Mr. Lahey solves the problem by putting the dough in a preheated covered pot -- a common one, a heavy one, but nothing fancy. For one loaf he used an old Le Creuset enameled cast iron pot; for another, a heavy ceramic pot. (I have used cast iron with great success.) By starting this very wet dough in a hot, covered pot, Mr. Lahey lets the crust develop in a moist, enclosed environment. The pot is in effect the oven, and that oven has plenty of steam in it. Once uncovered, a half-hour later, the crust has time to harden and brown, still in the pot, and the bread is done. (Fear not. The dough does not stick to the pot any more than it would to a preheated bread stone.)

The entire process is incredibly simple, and, in the three weeks I've been using it, absolutely reliable. Though professional bakers work with consistent flour, water, yeast and temperatures, and measure by weight, we amateurs have mostly inconsistent ingredients and measure by volume, which can make things unpredictable. Mr. Lahey thinks imprecision isn't much of a handicap and, indeed, his method seems to iron out the wrinkles: "I encourage a somewhat careless approach," he says, "and figure this may even be a disappointment to those who expect something more difficult. The proof is in the loaf."

The loaf is incredible, a fine-bakery quality, European-style boule that is produced more easily than by any other technique I've used, and will blow your mind. (It may yet change the industry. Mr. Lahey is experimenting with using it on a large scale, but although it requires far less electricity than conventional baking, it takes a lot of space and time.) It is best made with bread flour, but all-purpose flour works fine. (I've played with whole-wheat and rye flours, too; the results are fantastic.)

You or your 8-year-old may hit this perfectly on the first try, or you may not. Judgment is involved; with practice you'll get it right every time.

The baking itself is virtually foolproof, so the most important aspect is patience. Long, slow fermentation is critical. Mr. Lahey puts the time at 12 to 18 hours, but I have had much greater success at the longer time. If you are in a hurry, more yeast (three-eighths of a teaspoon) or a warmer room temperature may move things along, but really, once you're waiting 12 hours why not wait 18? Similarly, Mr. Lahey's second rising can take as little as an hour, but two hours, or even a little longer, works better.

Although even my "failed" loaves were as good as those from most bakeries, to make the loaf really sensational requires a bit of a commitment. But with just a little patience, you will be rewarded with the best no-work bread you have ever made. And that's no small thing.

No-Knead Bread

Adapted from Jim Lahey, Sullivan Street Bakery
Time: About 1 1/2 hours plus 14 to 20 hours' rising

3 cups all-purpose or bread flour, more for dusting
1/4 teaspoon instant yeast

1 1/4 teaspoons salt

Cornmeal or wheat bran as needed.

1. In a large bowl combine flour, yeast and salt. Add 1 5/8 cups water, and stir until blended; dough will be shaggy and sticky. Cover bowl with plastic wrap. Let dough rest at least 12 hours, preferably about 18, at warm room temperature, about 70 degrees.
2. Dough is ready when its surface is dotted with bubbles. Lightly flour a work surface and place dough on it; sprinkle it with a little more flour and fold it over on itself once or twice. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rest about 15 minutes.
3. Using just enough flour to keep dough from sticking to work surface or to your fingers, gently and quickly shape dough into a ball. Generously coat a cotton towel (not terry cloth) with flour, wheat bran or cornmeal; put dough seam side down on towel and dust with more flour, bran or cornmeal. Cover with another cotton towel and let rise for about 2 hours. When it is ready, dough will be more than double in size and will not readily spring back when poked with a finger.
4. At least a half-hour before dough is ready, heat oven to 450 degrees. Put a 6- to 8-quart heavy covered pot (cast iron, enamel, Pyrex or ceramic) in oven as it heats. When dough is ready, carefully remove pot from oven. Slide your hand under towel and turn dough over into pot, seam side up; it may look like a mess, but that is O.K. Shake pan once or twice if dough is unevenly distributed; it will straighten out as it bakes. Cover with lid and bake 30 minutes, then remove lid and bake another 15 to 30 minutes, until loaf is beautifully browned. Cool on a rack.

Yield: One 1 1/2-pound loaf.