

There is something subversive about sourdough. Hiding in the caverns of an open-crumb and layered in the irresistible crunch of the caramelized crust on a loaf of naturally leavened bread are the kernels of a revolution – a revolution consisting both something to come, yet at the same time the continuation of something as old as human’s relationship to nature and to each other.

My two favorite things about sourdough are its relationship to ecology and its relationship to giving. We don’t often think about how interconnected we are to the natural world around us and I constantly find myself craving the places in our everyday lives that remind us. I love when the acts of cooking, sharing and eating remind me explicitly of my place in the bigger picture of the ecosystems and community we inhabit. In particular, fermented foods have powerful way of shaking us free of a view of the world only concerned with the human. Fermented foods are a manifestation of the magic of transformation, they are the product of the billions of critters, yeasts, and bacteria living all around us, doing us a sweet favor of making food ingestible, all while making them more nutritious, and delicious at the same time.

To hold onto all of these forces at once is unlike any sense of belonging I have not found elsewhere. As someone who has struggled her whole life with definitions, with finding certainty about thoughts and beliefs, and identities, it is fitting that food – and particularly the plants we depend on for it - is the only thing I’ve felt able to say I know. In ‘food’ I am an artist, a historian, a storyteller, a caretaker, a healer, an anthropologist, a copycat, an inventor, a scientist, a mystic, a lover, a control freak, an abstainer, a soap-boxer, a withholder, a gourmand and an aesthete. I

am made of microbes, I am a part of a community, which is not only human. It is in the expression of these multiple truths that I find venues to dream about what a radical alternative of a caring world could look like.

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Maya Hey, whose research combines fermentation and feminism writes, “fermentation challenges some of the long standing beliefs about human power. We may presume that humans ‘do’ the fermenting, but humans can only set up conditions that are favorable/ hostile for certain microbes to thrive or suffer. In other words, human control is kind of a misnomer. Fermentation happens because of the multiple, ambient factors, not necessarily because of human motivations. If we think about fermentation this way, fermentation can teach us how to work with, instead of work on, living substances.”

It took over three months, and more than one tear-filled outburst, to bake my first real loaf of sourdough. The first time I tried was rushed (frankly, I wanted to impress a date), a mistake anyone well-versed in sourdough will tell you is futile. I spent weeks diligently growing my own starter (“my new child” I kept calling it) and some 72 hours coaxing the starter into a delicate dough using the elaborate methods outlined in Chad Robertson’s famous Tartine – setting timers, politely squeezing salt into the dough, and tenderly stretching and folding it. Yet, it came out of the oven a dense catastrophe. Three giant cavernous holes in the middle of a brick-like puck stared back

at me. The experience was humbling; akin to that feeling you have when standing on a really tall mountain and all of a sudden you think, “oh my god, I am so immensely small and stupid.” The microbial life in that loaf of bread was bigger than me, and simply. did. not. give. a. shit. that I had a date.

Since that first loaf, the three ingredients at the root of bread – flour, water, and salt – have transformed into the most lovingly given gifts I have walked, biked, bused, and driven to my loved ones, as well as nearly complete strangers. Instead of what I thought would simply be a new skill as a baker, sourdough has instead made me reflect on what it means to build and be in community and what it means to take on the responsibility of stewarding an ancient craft. It is a process that requires active care, a suspension of ego, and an exercise in patience, and I admit that last one is not always my strong suit. Building gluten structures during the fermentation stage of bread baking is akin to knitting together the connective tissue of community. While handling a dough, you have to be gentle and patient to create tenderness and allow for air bubbles to form, but firm and swift enough to build the strength and elasticity to support a loaf’s rise. It simultaneously requires a suspension of all expectations while also setting exceptionally high standards because you know what is possible, you know what beauty and nourishment can be achieved, you know that we all collectively deserve nothing less than the simple bounty of naturally leavened bread, of wild and enlivening sauerkraut, of an energetic glass of pétillant naturel.

I found the following notes scribbled down in the margins of the first entry of my bread journal

*I don't know what to do, I just know to give
I don't know if I am an artist or a scientist
I don't know if my love language is to touch
or be touched, to adore or be adored.
I don't know if I am or am not
But I know it has something to do with this
bread, and these lands, and this air.*

Baking sourdough is to touch and be touched. It is to give and to receive.

