



Amber waves of

GRAIN

Wheat a fundamental ingredient of civilization

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINE PETERSON

Swedish Cardamom Bread with pearly sugar, a recipe from Sally Harrington at the Country Gourmet in Barre.

While wheat may seem to be a rather boring food to write about — it’s not sweet and luscious like the date, or “in” like the pomegranate — it is such an important part of the human diet that it’s mentioned numerous times in the holy books of three major religions. The first of the seven biblical species found in the Promised Land, it has both physical value and spiritual meaning for the Jews.

Since wheat was so very important to human survival, Joseph certainly spent a lot of time thinking about it, both in interpreting his own dreams and those of the Pharaoh for whom he worked.

“Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” (Genesis 37:6-7)

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Loaves of bread at Crust Bakeshop on West Boylston Street in Worcester.

BOULOU

Makes 2 loaves

The French ruled over Tunisia for 75 years, so it's understandable that they had an enormous influence on many areas of life, including, of course, the food. Although the name of this bread comes from the word boule, France's traditional crusty round yeast loaf, Tunisian boulou is a quick bread enjoyed by the country's Jewish community. Stuffed with golden raisins and sesame seeds, and flavored with orange and anise, it is absolutely scrumptious.

INGREDIENTS:

- 4 cups flour
- 1 rounded tablespoon baking powder
- 1 cup sugar
- 1½ tablespoons white sesame seeds
- 4 ounces finely chopped almonds or coarse almond meal (or even almond flour if you prefer a smoother texture)
- ½ teaspoon anise or fennel seeds
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- Finely grated zest of 1 orange
- 1 cup orange juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¼ cup golden raisins

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Coat two small loaf pans (4"x8") with baking spray (the kind with flour in it). If you don't have that, then line the pan with parchment paper. In a mixing bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, sugar, seeds and almond meal or flour. Add the eggs, oil, orange zest, juice, vanilla extract, and raisins. Gently mix just until incorporated; do not over-mix. The sticky mixture will look like a muffin or quick bread batter. With a spatula, scrape the dough into the prepared pans. Bake on the middle rack for 45-50 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Cool completely before serving or storing.

grains, wheat was well known in the ancient world. A member of the genus *Triticum*, it is actually the product of a cross between three different grass species that experts believe evolved over 10,000 years ago. Probably because it can adapt to difficult growing environments, it grows on more land on Earth than any other crop — in 128 countries — second only to rice and corn.

The grain has served as a basic foundation of both the human and animal diet, as evidenced by fragments of ancient wheat unearthed by archaeologists at digs in eastern Iraq, dating back 9,000 years. And wheat found at different sites in Egypt's Nile Valley dates from around 5000 BCE. Even today, wheat supplies between 20 and 30 percent of the food calories for people around the world.

Although wheat was a staple grain in the East for millennia, it was unknown in the New World until the 15th century, when explorer Christopher Columbus landed in the West Indies. Spanish explorers brought the grain to Mexico just a few decades later, expanding its reach. However, not until 1602 did we Americans begin cultivating wheat, and they did it right here in Massachusetts, on Martha's Vineyard. Almost 200 years later, colonists, including one by the name of George Washington, added wheat to their farm acreage. Then, in the late 19th century, almost 350 years after Columbus landed, Mennonite immigrants from

Russia brought a variety of wheat seeds called Turkey Red to Kansas, where they harvested the first crop at the Shawnee Methodist Mission. Turkey Red is now the primary wheat variety grown in the Central Plains of the U.S.

Due to their long shelf life and high nutritional value, parched grains of wheat have been used for food throughout the millennia: by biblical figures, as military field rations, by backpackers and in survivalist bunkers. We are probably most familiar with the result of the grain's grinding. Wheat flour has probably been used more than any other grain as the main ingredient in bread. In fact, London's Petrie Museum features an exhibit of various Egyptian food products, including 3,500-year-old bread loaves made of wheat. But we also incorporate flour into many other foods including pasta, pastry, crackers, cookies and cakes.

Bread is such an important food throughout history and with so many peoples that it has rightfully earned the sobriquet "the staff of life." And

"breaking bread" with others is so ingrained in our social life and culture that the current pandemic quarantine has us Zooming and Skyping and FaceTiming our meals with family and friends. For many others, baking sourdough bread — and posting photos of it on Instagram — has become a trendy way to stave off boredom.

What makes wheat flour unique is that it contains gluten, the protein that enables a dough to rise by forming carbon dioxide during fermentation, thus producing light and fluffy bread. It's that same gluten, however, that can cause problems of another sort. While some people avoid gluten as a lifestyle choice and others claim intolerance, for those with celiac disease, consuming gluten-containing foods can be downright dangerous.

Despite all this, wheat-based foods are still basic items on our daily menu. Quite literally from A to Z — from South American arepa to Swiss zopf — we humans have developed scores of ways to incorporate wheat into our diets. 🍞

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On the spiritual side, much as stalks of wheat reach out and extend themselves as they wave in the field, they symbolize kindness to others.

Wheat was so important a crop that it could be manipulated by the ethically challenged. In the New Testament, Jesus relates a parable about enemies of a landowner who had sown tare seeds (a weed-like plant that resembled wheat) to spoil his crop, and thus endanger him and all who depended on him. When the landowner's servants ask whether they should cut the tares, he replies, "Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them." (Matthew 13)

Islam teaches that Adam received the grain after he was expelled from the

Garden of Eden. In this passage, we read that instructions for cultivating, processing and even baking are given.

"Adam said: 'What do I do with this?' He said: 'Spread them in the earth.' So he did and God caused them to grow immediately. Sowing in the earth thus became a custom for Adam's children. Then God commanded him to harvest it, to collect and husk it by hand. Then he commanded him to winnow it. Gabriel brought two stones to him and placed one of them on top of the other and ground the wheat. Then God commanded him to knead it and commanded him to make bread in the ashes. Gabriel gave Adam a stone and iron. Adam struck them together and fire came out of them. He was the first to make bread from ashes."

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