



PRESS RELEASE

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When it's all right for the white

Simone Sekers chronicles the rise, fall and rise again of white bread as it regains its texture and nutrition

A recent debate in the letters column of the Times has been on the weighty question of what was the best thing before sliced bread. To a medieval peasant used to wearing out his teeth on a loaf that was made at best from a solid mixture of wheat and rye called maslin, and at worst from any sort of substance that could reasonably be ground into a flour, the answer must surely have been white bread.

This wasn't the flabby inconsequential stuff that has since earned itself such a bad name. It was a fine pale bread made from wheat flour that had been sifted of its rough chaff and bran and was a much more desirable thing than the dark, damp and dense bread generally eaten by the poor. Bran was certainly not desirable, being considered unhealthy and only fit for animal food except in

sifted out of the stoneground flour during the roller-milling process to the detriment of the nation's health and the alarm of nutritionists. White bread had begun its fall from grace. This fall reached bottom with the advent of sliced white bread, the blotting paper of the masses, produced in vast quantities by the huge conglomerates that began to swallow up small independent bakers during the late 1950s.

In 1953 a Government Flour Order decreed that the millers must restore to flour the vitamins and minerals that their destructive roller milling and bleaching process removed. While this improved the nutritious qualities of white bread, texture and flavour were still missing, as well as the fibre that was beginning to be seen as a desirable element. So brown bread began to gain space in bakers' ovens and on supermarket shelves. Anyone buying wholemeal flour from an independent miller and baking their own bread began to seem chic instead of cranky, and ploughman's lunches came complete with granary bread.

But white bread is gaining a new respectability: those of us who wouldn't dream of being caught with a wrapped sliced white loaf in the bin are quite to display a more ethnic variety. If it is unwrapped irregularly shaped and is the colour of unbleached linen, then that is the sort of white loaf to be seen with these days. It should spring back into shape when squeezed and it should, at best, smell of slightly damp clean sheets. Such bread can be eaten at the better restaurants, where good chefs bake their own. For those of us who like eating out at home, it is possible to go to a large supermarket and come home with a loaf of pugliese (round, homely, made with olive oil with a dense texture that makes it good for toasting) or ciabatta (oblong, again made with base for grilled goats' cheese or a slice of salami).

Both Italian breads are baked by the La Fornai bakery in the North Acton, where they are given the proper proving time denied the factory loaf produced by the dreaded Chorleywood process, devised in the mid-1960s to substitute the lengthy and

times of exceptionally poor harvest and famine. This association with hard times made it even more unpopular and it wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that dieticians began to think there might be some good in it. In The English Bread book, published in 1857, Eliza Acton inserts a note of near-incredulity in her description of wholemeal flour by adding that it was thought by "extremely clever men who thoroughly understand the subject, to make the most wholesome and strengthening bread that can be compounded". In other words, a respect for wholemeal bread was considered as cranky then as it was to be 100 years later.

With the great change from the grinding of corn between millstones to roller milling at the end of the 19th century, white bread became available to everyone, not just the rich, and because everyone preferred it and added it to their diet, it was on the way to contributing to such ills as rickets and scurvy. The valuable vitamin B1, as well as the iron and calcium contributed by the wheatgerm that remained, together with the scorned bran, was

expensive proving by high-speed mixing. Look, too, for "traditional" white bread, made with similarly matured dough, which does give a noted improvement in flavour. Sliced white bread now comes in many guises, usually with added fibre of one sort or another to give it added virtue. But the greatest virtue comes if you are fortunate enough to be able to lay your hands on a stock of stoneground white flour. While organic and unbleached white flour is widely available, it doesn't have the speckled appearance and extra flavour provided by the retention of the wheatgerm.

A freshly baked loaf made from flour like this makes, among other things, the best possible tomato sandwiches; chunks of very ripe tomato - much easier to deal with than slippery slices held together with that impossibly chewy skin - lightly sprinkled with salt, and then embedded in plenty of salty butter spread on a thick slice, with another slice clapped on top. If you are feeling homesick for the Mediterranean, you can add chopped garlic, basil, anchovies, and use olive oil instead of butter. A dish of black olives and another of salami and the effect is complete - but the bread, whether it be French or English, Italian or Greek, must be white. Thank goodness, now there is something than sliced white bread. Eliza Acton's The English Bread Book, with an introduction by Elizabeth Ray, is published by southover Press at £11.95. The Traditional Cornmillers Guild, publishes a recipe booklet with a list of millers and their products - not all make stoneground white flour. Send a cheque for £2.50 to Mrs Betsy Mountford, Claybrook Mill, Claybrook Magna Lutterworth, Leics LE17 5DB.

Bakers of good white bread: Bagatelle, 44 Harrington Road, London SW7. Clarke's, 122 Kensington Church Street, W8. Maison Blanc, 3 Woodstock Road, Oxford. La Fornai is available from Waitrose, Sainsbury and Marks & Spencer stores.

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