

Easy Dough

Cooking up a little something out of nothing



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High school did not prepare me for college, which was fine and good since no respectable college would have me. Instead, I packed a bag and aimed for Greece, although I somehow overshot and ended up working the fields on a kibbutz in Israel. I have nothing to say about the cafeteria food we stuffed ourselves with there, but we had some fantastic bananas. From there I headed south, joining my friend Janet on a trek through the Sinai led by a man who had served in the army near Dahab and never left. He was tight with the Bedouins, and they, with their camels, took us on a journey for nine days. This was the beginning of my year of figuring it out on my own.

The Bedouins had figured it out on their own a long, long time ago. They understood where they were and what the elements would provide. They brought almost no food on the trek. There were some tins of this and that, and a few bags of dry goods. If I hadn't been reckless and out of touch, I would have been worried. In this case my ignorance kept me calm.

Sinai is a sacred land, and also it looks like Mars—red sandstone mesas cut with canyons and what Cecil B. DeMille described in his *Ten Commandments* as “granite sentinels of death” for as far as the eye can see. No sign of civilization. Nothing has changed in thousands of years. You could easily picture the

Pharaoh sentencing Moses to wander the dry riverbeds with just a small skin of water. We would most certainly have been “beaten into the dust from which we came and ready for the maker’s hand” without our guides. Despite all the danger, it was quite pretty. After a full day of walking, gorging ourselves on the emptiness of the space, we were starving. The guides would park the camels and set up camp. They knew where to find water wells, they knew where small orchards grew with half a dozen plump red tomatoes. And they knew how to make dinner out of almost nothing.

Those Bedouins—with their goats and hidden water networks and acacia trees—had a particular kind of wealth.

They didn't have to stand impatiently in the express lane of Whole Foods with a basket of brie, flicking their credit cards against their fingernails when they wanted a good meal. I think they'd do well when the *kalpas* change over and Armageddon hits. Melting glaciers? They already live in 120-degree weather for half the year. Although I did read that the water table has since been sucked dry by the resorts in Sharm el-Sheik.

The Bedouins did something every night that totally delighted me. They made bread on the campfire. They mixed flour with water, rolled it out on a rock in the shape of a large pizza crust, and threw it on the fire just like that. About half an hour later they would extract a charcoal black disk and pry off the burnt shell. Inside was a wonderfully delicious bread that we would eat with some stewed black-eyed peas and tomato under a billion twinkling stars.

Almost every culture has their version of stovetop bread—tortillas in Mexico, injera in Ethiopia, crepes in France, chapattis in India. But for the

most part in the West we are too lazy or too busy to deal with it; we just go out and buy packaged versions of what really is one of the simplest things in the world to make.

I think we should all know how to concoct a simple something out of nothing. So recently I set aside my fear of dough and decided to give it a shot. After a few sticky, rubbery, charred disasters, I made what I think most closely resembled chapattis. I could give you a recipe, but I think the best thing to do would be to learn by doing. Make a few mistakes. Find your own way.

Here are some general guidelines: Get some warm water and a pinch of salt, gradually add flour until the dough doesn't stick to your hands. Knead for 15 minutes. It'll feel good, there's something primal about kneading. Also, this is what will make your bread less rubbery in the end. Let it sit covered under a cloth for at least 15 minutes. Divide it up into plum-sized balls, roll these out with a dusting of flour, then pop onto a very hot pan. Cast iron is good. In India, every household has a

tawa, a flat pan with a handle, a bit like a crepe pan but flatter. Teflon isn't great—you need something that can get piping hot without producing toxic gas.

Cook each side until brown spots appear, about 40 seconds. Some cultures use a little oil, but it's optional. Your bread should be toasty yet remain soft; sometimes it pillows out like a sopapilla. It should be eaten hot. You can try different kinds of flour. Chapattis are made with *atta*, a coarse wheat flour. But I think for the purpose of learning to make something out of practically nothing, just use what you have, make a mess, keep trying until you've got something you can eat.

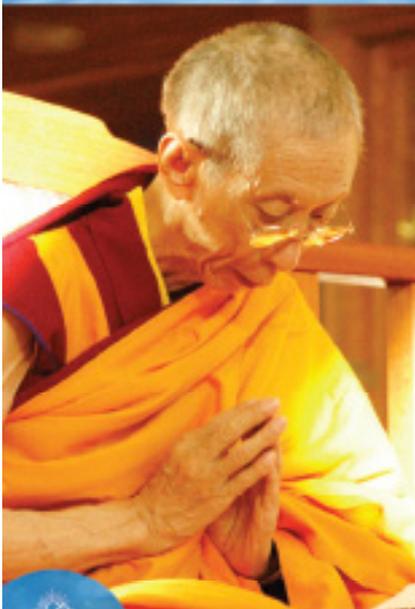
Wheat and water alone don't provide a lot of nutrition. However, I have the feeling that when the end of days comes, you'll be quite happy with a warm piece of bread, especially when served with a drop of ghee and a spot of tea. ▼

Noa Jones writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She is from New York and Colorado and is currently working on a novel while traveling.

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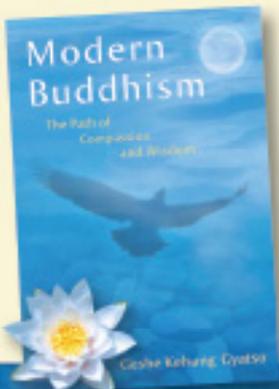
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