



Sourdough and French Bread

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Western Words

[PETER TAMONY, noted authority on American folk speech, discusses in this section various terms, phrases, and sayings that reflect the folklore and cultural history of the West.]

SOURDOUGH AND FRENCH BREAD

Sourdough is a dough made of flour and water fermented without yeast for baking bread. It is the leaven of the Bible, part of the fermented dough set aside to start fermentation another time in a new batch of flour and water. Largely, the word came into the American vocabulary at the time of the rush to the Klondike in the Yukon Territory of Northwest Canada in 1897–1898, the second great gold rush in our history. Because hardy prospectors carried sourdough in firkins or pots on their persons to sustain fermentation under whatever circumstances in the frozen north, this flavorful ingredient of the staff of life became so valued and characteristic the word was extended in meaning to personify searchers in the northlands, especially Alaskans, surviving old-timers of the rush now meeting annually along the Pacific Coast to celebrate the circumstances of their historic hegira.¹

A short time after James Marshall discovered gold in the American River in 1848, San Francisco began to be a city of varied ethnic groups. Streaming back to The City to splurge their dust on pleasures of the flesh, Forty-Niners found the sourdough bread they had eaten in the mountains on tables in San Francisco. Most of those who joined the Gold Rush were not miners, knowing little of the processes of extracting gold from the earth, once the creek and river-bed and surface gold began to peter out. Gold-mining was an old trade in Mexico, the methods and processes in use there being brought to northern California, as is evidenced by the rasters and such rude equipment for breaking down quartz exhibited at the State Park at Coloma. Along with Mexican miners came their sourdough.

1. "International Sourdough Reunion," *San Francisco News*, 16 August 1946, p. 7, cols. 2–6 (15th Annual); *San Francisco Examiner*, 26 September 1972, p. 3, cols. 6–8.

Because good sourdough French bread was the usual run of many bakeries in San Francisco it is difficult to detail the rise of its myth and legend prior to the advent of newspaper columnists. In general, this holds that the dough must be leavened with a closely guarded *sponge*, *starter*, or *mother* brought from Europe, preferably France, over a hundred years ago and passed from decade to decade in the same bakeshop; that the loaves must be baked in brick ovens of a pattern long since disused and beyond the skills of modern masons to recreate; that such ovens must be below sidewalk level at a precise but indefinite depth; that they must be fired to a certain temperature by certain woods; and that the resultant baking must be cooled at a certain rate in air moistened by San Francisco fog. Only when such complex elements are conjoined does the traditional sourdough French bread of San Francisco take its place beside the Sacher torte of Vienna, the jambalaya of New Orleans, the onion soup of Paris.

Bread-baking, or the preparation of cakes from flour or parched grain, is an ancient human art. Until recently Indians of the Pacific Coast prepared a sort of cake from crushed acorns much like those consumed by prehistoric man. In Hebrew, Bethlehem means "House of Bread," leavened and unleavened being words familiar through the Bible (Exod. 13:7; Gal. 5:9). In the Middle Ages bakers were subjected to regulation all over Europe. London bakers formed a brotherhood in 1155, were warned of their legal obligations by King John in 1203; the enactment of Pillory and Tumbrel (51 Hen. III, stat. 6) was framed for the express purpose of protecting the public from dishonest dealings of bakers, vintners, brewers, butchers, and such tradesmen. *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] records twelfth-century usage of sourdough (*Sauerteig*), the common denomination in Germanic languages, *levain* being French usage.

For centuries the art of bread-making has been carried to its highest level in Paris, leaven (or its synonyms, sponge, starter, and mother) and time being the basic ingredients of its bread. The use of yeast appears to have died out in France, but was revived toward the end of the seventeenth century, this being violently opposed by the faculty of medicine. Since, yeast has been used by Parisian bakers for fancy bread and pastry only. Yeast causes alcoholic fermentation and the production of alcohol and carbonic gas: the latter, expanding, pushes the particles of dough asunder, causing the bread

to rise, and with the alcohol, is soon expelled by the heat of the oven. Objections to yeast and other chemical additives to rectify the quality of flour, et cetera, continued through the nineteenth century, when varied efforts to systematize and mass produce bread for growing urban populations met with only limited success.²

During the Colonial Period French bakers emigrated to Mexico, no doubt carrying the implements and ingredients of their trade. In the course of the Guerrerist conflicts of 1828 foreign shops in Mexico City were pillaged, this happening becoming the basis of claims which engendered the so-called "Pastry War" of 1838, during which France blockaded ports of Mexico to effect settlements on behalf of its subjects. Steven F. Austin settled in 1821, Texas seceded in 1836, its annexation entailing the war of 1846–1848. Through these years the leaven of Paris was perpetuating itself, eventually to enliven the celebrated sourdough biscuit of the early-day ranches on the plains of Texas and New Mexico.³

Having lived in Texas and having fought in the Mexican War, George W. Keller arrived in California in 1848. In 1948 his daughter, Annie Keeler Williams, related stories of the early days of California told her by her father. Tuolumne County records attest he bought the French Hotel in Sonora on 12 October 1849. As she recalls his words, Mrs. Williams writes, "Then too, I obtained a dutch oven and baked what we call sourdough bread. This was the Mexican way of baking bread," and "Baking was done in Dutch Ovens and often the bread or flapjacks were baked in frying pans, the same as the miner did in his camps."⁴ G. D. Brewerton, *Overland with Kit Carson* (1853) writes of "baking a quantity of biscuit in one of those three-legged contrivances known to the initiated as a 'Dutchbake-oven' " (New York, 1930, p. 280), *OED* recording 1769 usage (oven, sb. 2 a). Among the bakeries listed in the San Francisco City Directory for 1856 are the French Bakery, Beraud Freres, Deu's, Mme. Lantheaume, and Leagay & Co. Grocers of the first decades of this century recall French bread and milk bread as equally best sellers, most housewives doing their Saturday bakings with yeast.

2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., s.v. "baking"; 11th ed. s.v. "bread"; "Pastry War, 1838," vol. 18, 339b.

3. Rose P. White, "The Sourdough Biscuit," *Western Folklore* 15 (1956): 93–94.

4. Annie Keeler Williams, *Early California Gold Rush Days* ([Glendale, Cal.: Murphy Printing Co.] 1948), pp. 15, 19. Copy in California State Library, Sacramento.

In France bread is not called *French bread*, this being a naming for varied types in other places, as to San Francisco the referent being to the traditional length of the French loaf. Phil Harris, the band leader-entertainer of Jack Benny, attests that good sourdough bread is currently baked in Mexico. Harris was accustomed to go to Tia Juana for his supply until soured by customs inspectors who slashed his loaves, suspecting contraband often associated with musicians. The head of the Chef's Association of the Pacific Coast reports that Leon, Mexico, "has beautiful sourdough French bread," while columnist Guy Wright, questioning the climatic myth, cites sweltering Saigon. Visitors to Mexico are served warm hard-crust breakfast rolls, *bollos*, which are recalled by Lu Watters of Yerba Buena Jazz Band fame, as being served in a small Mexican restaurant in the nineteen-twenties.⁵

Old-timers wonder at newspaper stories of French bread being taken across country in batches, or being shipped afar, as a gourmet delight. Such loaves may be baked in small lots, as the stuff generally merchandised is not of the quality sold formerly at every corner. The hard crust is the same, such still breaking the inlays, fillings, and plates of those who do not visit their dentists twice a year. The last of the undergrounds, the North Beach French-Italian Bakery, owned by a Swiss master who daily produced 700 loaves, suspended baking in 1966.⁶ Old country Italian bakers, who spread over San Francisco after the Earthquake and Fire of 1906, made sourdough French bread the equal of any: the pleasant smell of Ferro Bros.—Torino Bakery at 23rd and York characterized its area of the fog-free Mission District for several decades. The complex of modern time, mechanization, and men have contributed to the eclipse of the traditional genuine loaf, and the certainty of its production. The starter must leaven at least fourteen hours, preferably longer, such settings requiring costly space et cetera, a *bête noire* of inside capitalism. Gas ovens and line conveyors are now standard for mass production. Younger bakers, in the hurry-up of the times, do not readily inherit the nuances and practices, the traditions of aging craftsmen sagging from the scene.

Systematic studies of the "Nature of the San Francisco Sour

5. *San Francisco Examiner*, 1 April 1970, p. 39, col. 1, Tia Juana; *ibid.*, 14 August 1970, p. 24, col. 8, Leon, Mexico; *ibid.*, 1 September 1970, p. 29, col. 2, Saigon. *Bollos* were recalled by Sharon Huega McDonald and Lu Watters in conversations.

6. *San Francisco Examiner*, 2 March 1966, p. 10, cols. 1–8, illus.

Dough French Bread Process” (I. Mechanics of the Process; II. Microbiological Aspects), by Leo Kline, T. F. Sugihara, and Linda Bele McCready of the Western Regional Research Laboratory of the Department of Agriculture at Albany, California, were printed in the April 1970 *Bakers Digest*, 44 (2), pp. 48–50, pp. 51–53, 56–57. In these studies two unusual microorganisms responsible for souring activity remained unidentified. Berkeley entered a research contract with Oregon State University at Corvallis entailing \$49,000.00 to supplement its work, sophisticated techniques of genetic analysis not being available there. San Francisco newspapers greeted this grant with space-filling, half-baked effrontery.⁷ However, a previously undetermined species, a microorganism involved in the dough, *Lactobacillus Sanfrancisco*, was verified. Such supportive evidence is essential for scientific communication as well as the process of patent application, now being examined and waiting assignment to the people of the United States. There being a very San Francisco element, the problem of the future is its culture and propagation to flavor French bread of a sourdough quality that formerly enhanced the tables of The City, as well as its distribution to other parts, so that good, tasty bread may be available for a change.⁸

In San Francisco’s social life nostalgia and narcissism play parts. Promoted by the auxiliary of the Presbyterian Hospital as a fun event on 27 March 1973 was a sourdough French bread tasting. An entry of the Frisco Bakery of Los Angeles did not arrive, but one from Sonoma did. The Venetian Bakery baked a loaf ten feet long, requiring open windows of the delivery car. The upper crust or best bread selection of a banker-gourmet and professional athletes? Columbo Bakery of Oakland, with Toscano Bakery of Oakland second. The sole business sign in an 1879 photograph of what is now downtown Oakland reads “Unfermented Bread Bakery.”⁹ (Part of the growth of Oakland in the last century was of San Franciscans who moved across the bay because of social and sinful conditions (seaport, Barbary Coast). Generally, years ago Oakland was a Protestant church city, and would have been receptive to the purchase of “Biblical” unfermented bread.)

7. *San Francisco Examiner*, 20 August 1970, p. 1, cols. 1–8; *ibid.*, 21 August 1970, p. 36, col. 1 p. 37, col. 3; *ibid.*, 24 August 1970, p. 30, cols. 2–3 (cartoon).

8. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 August 1970, p. 1, cols. 2–4, p. 26, cols. 4–5.

9. *San Francisco Examiner*, 23 March 1973, p. 25, col. 1; *ibid.*, 28 March 1973, p. 25, col. 1. *Pony Express Courier* (Placerville, Cal.), V, 2, p. 1 (July 1938).

APPENDIX: NEWSPAPER SOURCES

San Francisco Progress, 22 June 1960, p. 7.

San Francisco Examiner, 24 January 1960, Pictorial Living, pp. 14–15.

Ibid., 27 August 1961, PL, pp. 16–17.

Ibid., 8 November 1964, People, p. 10.

Ibid., 30 January 1966, Sunday Punch, p. 8.

Ibid., 2 March 1966, p. 10.

Ibid., 14 August 1970, p. 24.

Ibid., 21 August 1970, pp. 36, 37.

Ibid., 22 September 1970, p. 44.

Ibid., 19 March 1972, California Living, pp. 20–27: guide to bakeries and breads.

San Francisco Chronicle, 4 November 1966, p. 17.

Ibid., 21 August 1970, pp. 1, 26; p. 42.

CALIFORNIA FOLKLORE SOCIETY

22D ANNUAL MEETING

The twenty-second annual meeting of the California Folklore Society will be held at California State College, Sonoma, Rohnert Park, 26–27 April 1974. Persons wishing to present papers should communicate with Eleanor Long, Santa Clara University.

Accommodations are available at the Holiday Inn, Santa Rosa, California. Local arrangements are being made by Eli Katz and Herminia Menez, Ethnic Studies Department, California State College, Sonoma.