

Baking bread through the ages

A friend of mine, Susan Lawrence, came by the bakery the other day, excitedly anticipating traveling to Minnesota to take a three-day course taught by Alan Scott on how to build a brick oven. She plans to build one on her property in the Upper Peninsula to bake artisan bread.

I told her how professor David James of Oakland University has achieved that in a dome-shaped oven he built in the woods next to his home. (In times of power failure and ice storms there is something to be said for that enterprise.)

Anyway, as I write this article during the recent snowstorm, I am warmed a little by remembering the amazing variety of bread ovens I've seen in different places around the world.

OVENS OF THE WORLD

A few years ago, I was in Egypt on business and I went to the Cairo Museum. My time was short there, so I hired a guide to speed me through the

large building. You can imagine how baffled he was when I spent only minutes at the King Tut exhibit, but stood fixated in front of a 5,000-year-old loaf of bread! Next to it were molds which were once filled with dough, sealed and then set over fire to bake. (Breads, discovered in the pyramids, sealed in bowls and buried for the deceased's journey to the next world, were baked in this way.)

The Egyptians are credited with inventing leavened bread. On the tomb of Ramses III there is a painting of a cylindrical oven — made of hatched clay. It looks like a truncated cone set on the ground — open at the top and with an air-intake hole at the base. A fire was lit at the bottom of the oven and once the sides were hot the fire was extinguished, leaving the embers to retain the heat.

The dough was shaped and then slapped against the inner walls. At just the right moment, the bread was separated by the baker with an iron implement before it fell down to the bottom of the cone oven.

In Dubai, a year after my visit to Cairo, I watched flat bread baked in much the same fashion as the early Egyptians did. The difference was that the oven was set into the ground. Two bakers shaped the

dough into discs. A third baker loaded the oven and then used two iron spears to remove the breads baked on the oven walls. It took a lot of dexterity. I suspect I would have been unable to stop most of the loaves falling into the bottom of the oven!

In North Africa, breads are still baked in a covered terra cotta kettle which is placed below hot ashes. This method was used widely in ancient Greece and Rome.

I grew up in England and I heard that the Romans gypsies in Ireland use a covered cast-iron kettle to contain the dough. They then bury it under embers created by burning blocks of peat moss from nearby fields. The Bible mentions bread baked in camel dung embers. No kettle was used! The embers were piled on top of the dough. Certainly, that bread couldn't have been called bland.

AS THE ROMANS DO

It was the Romans who first developed the dome-shaped oven, set above a horizontal surface or floor, upon which breads were placed after the embers (which heated the oven) were swept away. Today, you can see a modern interpretation of this ancient idea at Cucina Leone, the wonderful new take-out restaurant in

Birmingham. In 1986, I interned at Daniel Leavelle's "Bread Alone" bakery in the Catskill Mountains in New York. There, Dan had an oven-builer from France install two huge brick ovens, each of which had a hearth under the floor. The hearth is connected to the oven through an opening which involves a moveable device, allowing the flames to direct the flames towards various areas of the oven. The ovens were built with refractory bricks and with thick iron doors. Dan used lumber cut from the nearby forest for fuel.

Today, at the Give Thanks Bakery in Rochester, we have a modern oven from France which incorporates many of the old principles and marries them with new techniques. So the three decks are made of stone to ensure heat retention — as did bricks in early days — but at a touch of a button, we can release steam into the baking chambers. This helps to achieve the beautiful golden color and crisp crusts. And just as important — consistently wonderful bread, day by day.

That's something the early Egyptians would have found difficult to achieve.

Gerald Mathes is the owner of Give Thanks Bakery in Rochester. Visit the bakery's Web site at www.givethanksbakery.com or call (248) 601-1542.



In Greece and Italy, stuffed vegetables are a popular takeout meals.

Mediterranean-style takeout, at home

BY DANA JACOBI
CORRESPONDENT

Take-out has many definitions. To us, it usually means pizza or fast food like burgers and fries.

But despite the globalization of our culture across the Atlantic, Europeans still enjoy takeout that includes local dishes as well as American fast food.

Parisians can still pick up a complete dinner at the local traiteur, neighborhood shops that sell a whole roasted chicken, or the traditional stew called Beef Bourguignon, or crisp green beans almandine. Most American supermarkets offer equally honest, prepared food, but you have to be careful of high-fat items and supersized portions.

Some French cities have crêperies that serve paper-thin, filled pancakes. The way they fill, fold and package them for takeout is as skillful as the centuries-old art of making a tender crêpe. Here in America, some specialty markets sell plain crêpes, vacuum-packed, ready to heat and fill.

Warm them like a tortilla, in a dry pan, and fill, perhaps with a slice of low-fat ham and leftover cooked spinach, a combination that is très Français.

Further south, in Greece and Italy's stuffed vegetables are a popular takeout. They include whole tomatoes and onions as well as peppers. Usually filled with rice seasoned with fresh herbs, they may also contain chopped tomatoes, raisins, or chopped meat.

Here in America, food shops featuring Mediterranean cooking offer these colorful, stuffed vegetables.

Or you can make them at home. Instead of time, so they are waiting to be reheated for dinner, as delicious as if they were delivered from the Greek taverna you wish was around the corner.

GREEK STUFFED VEGETABLES

- 1 cup short-grain brown rice, rinsed and drained for 1 1/2 cups long-grain brown rice
- 6 small green bell peppers
- 6 small tomatoes
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped, about 1 cup
- 1 cup snipped fresh dill
- 1 cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 1 cup feta cheese, crumbled
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 cup fat-free, reduced-sodium chicken broth

Cook rice according to package directions. Turn rice into mixing bowl and let sit 15 minutes to cool slightly. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Slice tops off peppers and tomatoes and set tops aside. Remove seeds and membranes from peppers. Using a melon baller or small spoon, scoop out tomato flesh and reserve. Discard seeds from tomato flesh and chop the meat into 1/2-inch pieces.

Add tomato, onion, dill, parsley and cheese to rice. Use a fork to mix together, taking care not to mush rice or cheese. Mix lemon juice into rice, and season to taste with salt and pepper.

Stuff peppers and tomato shells loosely with rice mixture, using about 1/2 cup each. Arrange stuffed vegetables in a baking dish just large enough to hold them (9- by 13-inch or bigger). Replace tops on stuffed tomatoes and peppers. Pour chicken broth into pan. Bake about 1 1/2 hours, until vegetables are soft but still hold their shape.

Serve lukewarm or at room temperature. Vegetables are best when made the day they are served, as rice turns hard when refrigerated. Makes 6 main-course or 12 side-dish servings.

Nutritional information per serving: 152 calories, 2 g. total fat (1 g. saturated fat), 30 g. carbohydrate, 5 g. protein, 4 g. dietary fiber, 178 mg. sodium. Dana Jacobi writes for the American Institute for Cancer Research. Jacobi is author of The Joy of Soy, and recipe creator for AICR's Stopping Cancer Before It Starts.

EASTER

FROM PAGE B1

The edible candy bunny was first used as a symbol of Easter in 18th century Germany, where it was made of pastry and sugar. Also in Germany, children made nests of grass and placed them in their yards. They believed the Easter Bunny would fill these baskets with brightly decorated eggs during the night. Eggs and bunnies are a celebration of life. Easter is a celebration of Christ's resurrection, so timing has blended the two.

ROTI NI SALAD ALFREDO

We don't have to suggest what to do with extra Easter chocolate ... but here's a recipe for the leftover eggs that goes beyond the traditional egg salad.

- 1/2 ounces rotini (corkscrew-shaped) pasta
- 1/2 cups chopped red bell pepper
- 1/2 cups blanched peas
- 1/2 cup chopped green onion
- 2 cups plain nonfat yogurt
- 3 cups reduced-fat mayonnaise
- 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/2 tablespoons dried basil or dill weed, crushed
- 1 tablespoon garlic salt
- 1/2 teaspoon white pepper
- 10 to 12 hard-cooked eggs, shelled and chopped

Cook pasta until al dente; drain. In a large bowl, combine the pepper, peas and green onions, gently stir in pasta. In a separate bowl blend the remaining ingredients, except for the eggs. Stir the dressing into the pasta. Gently combine the eggs into the salad. Cover and chill until serving. Serves 12.

Source: The Global Gourmet

Enjoy ham and cheese in braid

HAM AND SWISS CRESCENT BRAID

- 1/2 pound cooked ham, chopped (2 1/2 cups)
- 1 cup frozen broccoli florets, thawed
- 4 ounces (1 cup) shredded Swiss cheese
- 1/4 (5 ounce) jar sliced mushrooms, drained
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise or salad dressing
- 1 tablespoon honey mustard
- 2 (8 ounce) cans Pillsbury Refrigerated Crescent Dinner Rolls
- 1 egg white, beaten
- 2 tablespoons sliced almonds

Heat oven to 375° F. Spray cookie sheet with nonstick cooking spray. In large bowl, combine ham, broccoli, cheese, mushrooms, mayonnaise and mustard; mix well.

Unroll both cans of dough. Place dough with long sides together on spray cookie sheet, forming 15- by 12-inch rectangle. Press edges and perforations to seal.

Spoon and spread ham mixture in 6-inch strip lengthwise down center of dough. With scissors or sharp knife, make cuts 1 1/2 inches apart on long sides of dough to width's inch of filling. Twisting each strip once, alternately cross strips over filling. Tuck short ends, under; press to seal. Brush dough with beaten egg white; sprinkle with almonds.

Bake 28 to 33 minutes or until deep golden brown. Cut into crosswise slices. Makes 8 servings.

Recipe courtesy of Pillsbury.

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Special Anniversary Edition of the Birmingham Eccentric, highlighting the history of the newspaper in Birmingham.

Saturday • May 3 • 1 p.m. - 4 p.m.
Birmingham Historical Museum presents an exhibit "125 Years of Your Hometown Newspapers" The Eccentric is the oldest continuous business in Birmingham. The exhibit will reproduce selected articles, advertising copy and photos. FREE Edy's frozen fruit bar/white supplies last.

Wednesday • May 7 • 7:30 p.m.
In partnership with the Jewish Community Center "The Power of the Newspaper Worldwide" A lecture by Thomas A. Rose Publisher and CEO of the Jerusalem Post at the JCC • Handelman Hall 6600 W. Maple Rd. West Bloomfield. Donations may be made to the Israel Emergency Fund in lieu of an admission fee.

Thomas A. Rose

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