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Mr. Greco

English III

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### Baking a Difference

Bright overhead lights illuminate the kitchen against the dark morning sky in the window. The oven hums as it heats up, its soft orange glow smiling. A dusting of flour lines the countertop. In the center of it all, Karen McKinley is ready to begin the now-daily process of baking sourdough. Her fingers dance from the counter to the dough, to the bowl—a rhythmic ballet, each movement carefully crafted and meticulously perfected. Her motions are disciplined, yet softened by joy. She moves efficiently, stretching, folding, and shaping the dough. And yet, Karen isn't a trained baker, and until recently, she didn't have such a handle on the craft.

As most people experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, Karen was forced to work from home after her company issued lockdown restrictions to protect employees and limit the spread of the virus. For her, that meant leaving her office at the Stanford Alumni Association and entering a whirlwind of Zoom meetings and uncertainty. However, the absence of her usually packed schedule and lack of typical social interaction left the days feeling dull and monotonous. She found herself with much more free time than she had previously and no way to spend it. From what started as purely an experiment, Karen's bread-making journey has grown into something much more than just a hobby. Through fundraising, connecting with the community, and coping creatively with the difficulties of a devastating global crisis, Karen has found meaning and purpose in the craft of baking sourdough.

Of all of the diverse quarantine trends, baking sourdough became one of the most popular and memorable. In fact, in March of 2020, yeast and baking powder were among the top purchased shelf-stable products in the country (Domonoske). Those looking to purchase these items were faced with empty shelves, both in stores and online, as bread-making increased in popularity. Yeast and baking powder joined the likes of toilet paper and hand sanitizer on the nationwide list of high demand but low supply products in the early months of quarantine. With all of the buzz about sourdough constantly in the air, it was impossible for Karen not to get pulled into the craze and make her own attempt at baking.

Her entrance into the world of baking began like that of many others during the pandemic. One of her friends who had picked up baking randomly offered her a container of sourdough starter. Having mostly never baked from scratch, Karen decided to give it her best shot for fun, not thinking much would come of it. Like most people experimenting with baking for the first time, Karen's initial attempt was not pretty, to say the least. Reflecting on the experience, she recalls that "it was pretty much a disaster" (McKinley). The hard, dense loaf was barely edible; to even call it "bread" would be a stretch. "It was not very good," she says, laughing. "But I was determined to try again and did a lot of learning" (McKinley).

Karen never in her life thought that such a hobby would stick, much less have such a profound impact on her life for the next two years. But, as time went on, she surprised herself by falling in love with baking. As days, weeks, and months went by, Karen spent a part of most days in the kitchen, slowly advancing her skills. She experimented with new and creative recipes, ranging from a traditional sourdough loaf to soft pretzels to pancakes. Despite her busy schedule, Karen managed to build baking into her routine. Working from home during the pandemic gave her both the time and flexibility required to make bread.

Although the end result of baking sourdough looks impressive and tastes delicious, “it requires patience, but not too much skill, believe it or not” (McKinley). In itself, sourdough bread is just a combination of flour, water, salt, and a form of natural yeast (known as sourdough starter). The acids and bacteria in the starter act as a leavening agent, allowing the dough to rise while it bakes. Additionally, sourdough starter gives the bread its distinct sour flavor that it is famous for (Calvert).

The baking process begins with feeding the starter with flour and water. As it ferments, the starter will increase in volume and be ready to be mixed into more flour, water, and salt and then left to rise. Throughout the day, the baker must stretch and fold the dough, allowing it to build strength. After multiple stretches and folds, the bread is placed into a special basket called a banneton where it continues to ferment overnight. In the morning, the dough has finished rising and is ready to be decorated and later baked.

However delicious sourdough may be, it would not have been reasonable or healthy for Karen or her family to keep and eat every loaf she made. So, as a way to treat her friends and family—and as an excuse to not eat all of it—she began to give away some of her bread as gifts. “[Bread] seemed to make people happy,” she says. “I realized that I could level that up to use it for good for others as well” (McKinley).

In early April of 2021, Karen held her very first fundraiser for Second Harvest Food Bank. For the weekend, she functioned as a “pop-up bakery” in her neighborhood for anyone interested. She asked people to make a donation to the organization in exchange for a loaf of bread. Despite setting a minimum price per loaf, she found that many people donated more than the suggested amount. Her most recent fundraiser, in March of 2022, helped to raise money for Together Rising, an organization campaigning to support families suffering from the attacks on

Ukraine. Her supporters' enjoyment of her bread as well as her contribution to the community was doubly rewarding for Karen.

Prior to the pandemic, Karen had very little experience baking. Even in the rare occurrences of when she did, it was typically from a box or something very simple. As a working mom of two she just didn't have the time to pick up baking from scratch as a hobby. However, when the lockdown hit, she suddenly had much more time at home than ever before. "In some ways the pandemic was a gift in that it gave me the gift of time," Karen recalls. "Bread-making just came along at the right time for me in that way" (McKinley).

It excited Karen to discover something that she enjoyed so much. For the first time, she found that she could successfully bake from scratch: "it was really exciting and gratifying to see that happen" (McKinley).

Although Karen had not baked much prior to quarantine, her mother, Carolyn Heywood, had always been an avid cook and baker. Carolyn recalls that as a child, Karen had never been very interested in the kitchen. So when she began baking sourdough consistently during the pandemic, Carolyn was surprised. "It was really kind of fun for me to see her do this," she says. "I really admire what an artist she is with it" (Heywood).

Despite living only an hour away from each other, Covid restrictions forced the two to stay physically apart. However, their mutual love of baking sourdough bridged the gap and kept them connected. Karen attributes much of the reason why she stuck with baking to her mother, who supported and helped her along the way. "I felt like it was something that we could do together apart, and that was really special" (McKinley).

Due to the lonely nature of quarantine life, people across the world have dealt with loneliness and feelings of hopelessness. According to a study conducted by the Kaiser Family

Foundation, “during the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder” (Kamal). To cope with such a boring and stressful situation, people have had to find creative ways to spend their time in order to remain happy and find meaning.

Although she didn’t start baking sourdough as a way to deal with the initial stress, Karen found that it was a comforting distraction from the harsh reality of the pandemic. Being able to slow down from her busy life and give her brain a rest allowed her to stay positive and focus on something simpler and more enjoyable. Her creative expression through bread-making broke up the monotony of working from home and kept her mind happy and healthy.

For do-it-yourself craftspeople like Karen, baking bread is more than just a simple hobby. The rise in popularity of baking bread during the pandemic was not only a means of coping with stress and anxiety—but a demonstration of the deeply human connection to the art of making bread. In fact, the act of making bread has historically played a crucial role in the development of human life. For centuries, cooking and baking has allowed humans to experience routine and purpose in their lives. *SAPIENS*, a digital anthropology magazine, uses this archaeological lens to explain the historical significance behind the nationwide obsession with bread-making:

“Making sourdough bread creates a domestic rhythm that provides some sense of stability and social cohesion in a time of disruption and anxiety” (Cutright).

As the world has started to return to a more “normal” state, and the stay-at-home orders and other Covid restrictions are lifted, Karen has already found it difficult to bake as much as she was able to when the pandemic was at its height: “I’m already struggling with finding the same amount of time that I had before” (McKinley).

For Karen, bread-making has transformed into more than just a hobby to fill time; it has become an art form, a source of connection, a beacon of hope in the light of adversity. Baking has grown into her real passion, profoundly influencing her own life and those around her. Karen believes that “bread-making has been such a positive part of these last few years,” and despite the changing world, she’ll “never stop doing it completely” (McKinley).

Through her bread, Karen’s creativity is quite different from conventional art, but has its own beauty in a unique and flavorful way. “I actually love the impermanence of bread,” she says, smiling. “I can make a big mess, I can create something, I can give that something away, and then start over again the next day” (McKinley).

Works Cited

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