



Chronicle

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A GAME CHANGER

Desegregating U-M Basketball



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Herman the German and Amish Friendship Bread

Everlasting Dough

By Barbara J. Barton

People have been baking bread all over the world for thousands of years, and nearly everyone loves to inhale the delicious aroma of freshly baked bread. The crunchy brown crust envelopes a softer center full of air pockets created by bubbles of carbon dioxide. The leavening of bread is created by a single-celled, microscopic organism called yeast. As the yeast colony grows, it converts ingested sugars and starches into alcohol and carbon dioxide—a process known as fermentation. All yeast needs to thrive is a warm, moist environment and a good meal. But commercial baking yeast did not become available until the late 1800s, when the Fleischmann Brothers put it on the market. So how did bakers leaven their bread before that time?

Wild yeast spores are everywhere, floating and falling through the air. The early Egyptians learned that when flour and water were left out to ferment, the resulting dough would rise. In other words, wild yeast spores fell into it, and leavened bread was born—as was the “sourdough” starter. Sourdough is known to take on unique flavors depending on where it lives and who feeds it, since it is colonized by local bacteria and yeast.

Sourdough became popular during the Klondike and California Gold Rush days. Miners are said to have cuddled up at night with their jars

of sourdough to keep it from freezing. It was also very important to the loggers in Michigan, who ate sourdough bread and pancakes daily.

Steve Savanna currently runs Mill Pond Bread in Chelsea, a bakery his father, John, opened in 1980. Ten years earlier, John acquired a sourdough starter from a colleague of his in the San Francisco area. At that time, John was told that the sourdough culture was more than 100 years old and originated in northern France. The Savanna family has kept that starter going ever since.

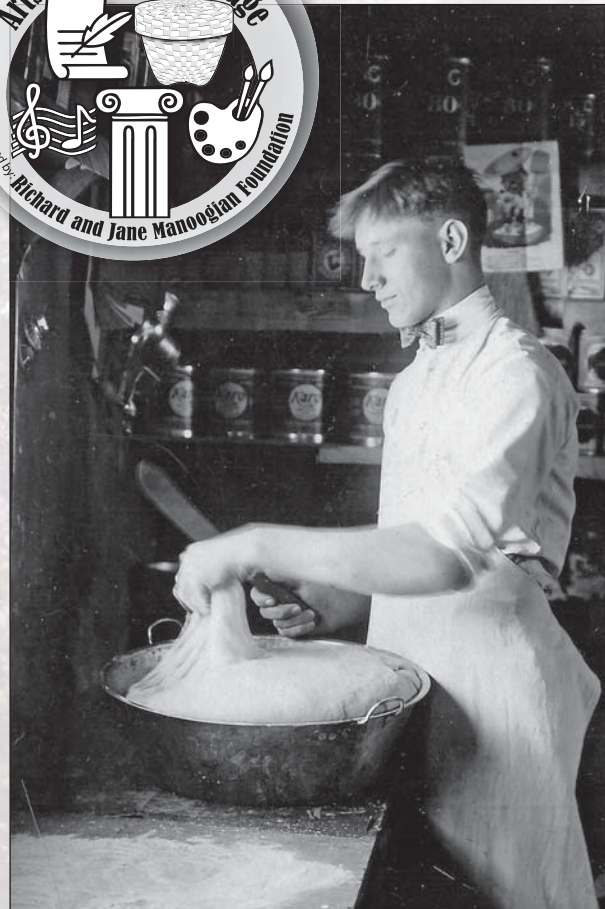
“Amish Friendship Bread” was often referred to as the chain letter of baking—and it had nothing to do with the Amish. The concept of sharing friendship bread was started in the 1860s and regained popularity in the 1930s. The sourdough starter jumped back into the spotlight in the 1980s, but people used it to make cake instead of bread. The starter is fed flour, sugar, and milk and is sweeter than traditional sourdough.

Another natural starter is named “Herman the German” and originated in Europe. One difference between Herman the German and Amish Friendship Bread is the source of the yeast: the former reportedly was started with commercial yeast, while the latter

began with wild yeast. Herman the German is also fed flour, sugar, and milk but is kept in the refrigerator. Like all sourdoughs, it is passed down from generation to generation.

There are many recipes available to teach you how to make your own sourdough starter, or perhaps you have a friend who will share his or hers. Either way, it is a wonderful tradition to begin—the sharing of bread with your community. ☑

Barbara J. Barton is a Lansing-based wild-foods forager, author, and singer-songwriter.



A cook makes sourdough at the Clinton Fosterling Lumber Camp in the early twentieth century. (Photo courtesy of the Delta County Historical Society.)