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Hurst & Horn

SEASONAL NEWSLETTER FOR THE KINGDOM OF ATLANTIA ROYAL FORESTRY GUILD

Questing for the bell of the stag from Livre de chasse (1387) by Gaston Fébus

Autumn fruits of our labors

BY ISOBEL OF CARNEWYTH, HIGH CHRONICLER

The harvests roll in as the weather cools down. Whether you've been enjoying the out of doors or it's finally become cool enough to start the camping season, attention turns to preparing for the winter and the shorter days ahead. Fall is a great time to experiment with fire cooking and new recipes that showcase the bounty of the year. Seasonal favorites such as apples and pumpkins join feast menus. It's also a good time to begin evaluating gear improvements and learn new crafting skills. Enjoy this edition's focus on cooking and sharing new skills.

Wood fired sourdough experiments

BY ISOBEL OF CARNEWYTH, FORESTER

One of the core aspects of our hobby is experimental archaeology. Trying out clothes, tools, recipes, etc. that may have been plausible through the 16th century can be both educational and entertaining. One of my favorite activities is to cook over a wood fire, particularly while camping. This summer, I was able to experiment baking sourdough bread outdoors for the first time during a week-long event.

Wood-fired ovens and baking bread have a long history with Egyptians and Greco-Roman cultures using clay ovens [1]. European Medieval cultures developed community bread ovens and even portable clay ovens (Figs. 1,2).

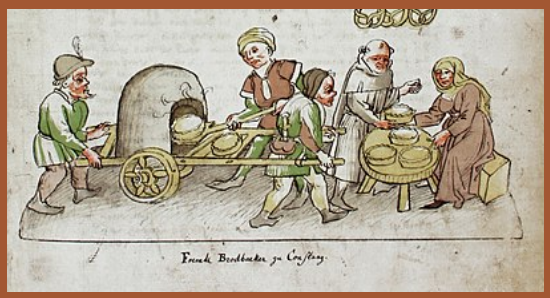

Figure 1. Rosgartenmuseum Konstanz, Hs. 1, Bl. 23r Richental: Konzilschronik, Pastetenbäcker und Verkaufsstand c.1464, public domain via Wikimedia commons.

Figure 2. French communal bread oven, Four à pain d'Urval, cc 3.0 via wikimedia commons

While most of these techniques use a flat surface with a domed cover to diffuse heat over the top of the dough, many of us are more familiar with baking using a cast iron Dutch oven, either in our indoor kitchen ovens or in a campfire context. Cast iron Dutch ovens first appeared in the early 18th century when Abraham Darby used a new technique of sand casting iron to adapt a Dutch brass pot design (patented 1707) [2]. These pots have two key features, portability and heat diffusion, a welcome anachronism.

Portability was a key focus of medieval armies on the move, and wood engravings of Landsknecht armies show several cooking set ups [3]. However, building a clay oven on site or transporting a portable oven-wagon can be challenging, if not time prohibitive, so the cast iron Dutch oven gives us an opportunity to have fresh bread at camping or other events.

My bread dough recipe is very simple and consists of flour, water, live starter, and salt and was shared by a fellow SCAdian, Mistress Drea di Pelegryne. Live starters were used predominantly until barm from brewing became popular in the 15th and 16th centuries [4]. Maintaining a live starter under field conditions (warm days and cool nights) allowed the microbial culture to shift towards strains that generated a more sour flavor [5] by the third experiment, which had previously eluded me during my baking trials in my home kitchen. I found that time of day, and thus fermentation temperature, resulted in quite different rise times and flavor.

Figure 3. Sand table and cast iron Dutch oven with hardwood coals.

The first experiment was started late one night in poor lighting and baked the following midday. The second experiment was again started in the dark for overnight fermentation, but with better lighting and also had a midday bake. The third and final field experiment was started in the morning for a midday fermentation and dinner time bake. All three doughs were mixed and fermented directly in the cast iron aluminum liners, initially because the camp mixing bowls were hiding and later for convenience.

All three experiments were baked in my five quart cast iron, on a camp mate's sand table in its inaugural event (Fig. 3). While said campmate had considerable success baking his no-knead breads with charcoal briquettes, I decided to jump in the deep end and attempt to use wood coals. The sand table a key feature of being waist-height and thus allow standing while cooking. It also has plenty of space to create a feeder fire and separate cooking areas. The downside is that the coals cool down considerably faster than if I was working with a portable fire pit or an in-ground set up.

The heat distribution proved to be the trickiest aspect of the experiments. The recipe I used is fairly robust and the doughs were fairly similar going in to bake. The Dutch oven was pre-heated each time before the dough + liner was

added. The first experiment turned out quite well, although the rise was a bit uneven and the bottom fairly blackened. It disappeared quickly with visitors to aid in the taste-testing (Fig. 4, top left, Fig. 5).

The second experiment was less successful. The day was hot and I was also babysitting a chili for dinner that night, so the pot was likely a little too hot initially and then lost heat as I didn't keep hot enough coals on the lid of the oven. The result was a loaf sunken a bit in the middle, but still cooked through albeit less visually appealing (Fig. 4, top right).

The third experiment was somewhere between the two, with the most complex and delicious flavor of the three. It had a nice even rise, but the top was just not browning, again due to struggles keeping enough hot coals on the lid. My husband and I eventually gave in and begged some half-spent coals that a campmate had used to bake a peach cobbler and we were able to get a browned crust on top (Fig. 4, bottom).

By far, the biggest lesson learned had to do with coal creation and management. Commercial coals burn hotter and longer than the hardwood we were attempting

Figure 4. Sourdough loaf experiments 1 (top left), 2 (top right), and 3 (dough bottom left, baked bottom right).

to generate alongside baking. We found that a couple of larger pieces of wood as the base of the feeder fire worked well, but the narrow diameter wood splits used to create charcoal often lost heat quickly. The virtue of the elevated sand table vs shortened charcoal longevity remains the biggest challenge, but it sure was nice not having to work bent over a hot fire and still have warm bread with dinner.

While experiment 2 was dense, experiments 1 and 3 had a nice crumb. I am keen to try out some of the earlier baking techniques using clay ovens, such as the Roman clibanus [6] in future experiments.

Figure 5. Sourdough loaf experiment 1 sliced open and ready for taste tasting.

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