

The Bread Makers

By Duval Reads

All over the world, for thousands of years, bread has been an important part of many people's diets. In almost every culture, people make bread or foods like bread: in Mexico they eat tortillas;

in India they eat chapati; in Israel they eat matzo; and in America we may eat any of the above—plus bagels, muffins, biscuits, and sliced bread.

In colonial times, most breads were made from wheat or corn. Where did the wheat and corn come from? Right: the farmer! But it was a long process from the farmer's field to the baker's shop. Today we're going to learn about what—and who—was involved with making bread.

First, the farmer planted his crops of wheat and corn. Then he harvested them, or picked them when they were fully grown. Next, the farmer had to separate out the seeds, or grains, from the plant. Then the seeds had to be ground into flour.

A long time ago, people used to grind their own wheat grains or corn kernels with big stones called grindstones.

Early grindstones, used by native people all over the world, were like the ones in this picture: One stone was larger and either flat or bowl-shaped, and the other stone was usually small enough to be held in the hand. The person grinding would spread some grains on the larger stone and grind them with the smaller stone.

Imagine grinding two stones together all day long, just to get enough flour to make one loaf of bread. It was hard work! Eventually people found a quicker way to do the job. Introducing: the mill!

Mills existed in Europe long before people settled in America. A mill did the same thing as a person with a grindstone: it crushed the grains of wheat between two stones.

The stones in a mill were called millstones, and they were very, very large—far too large for a person to lift. Instead of a person grinding the stones together, a giant machine grinds the heavy millstones in a mill together. The bigger the millstones, the more grain the mill could crush into flour.

Water mills were the most common type of mill in early America. They were built right on the rivers. The fast-flowing water made the big wheel turn around. The wheel was connected to the gears that made the millstones inside the building turn. The heavy weight of the stones pressed hard to grind the grains.

The tradesperson in charge of the mill was called a miller. The miller would charge farmers money (or some of their grains) to grind their wheat or corn into flour. The miller would grind the grain into flour, then collect the flour into bags. A miller with a water mill could grind and bag more flour in one day than a farmer with a grindstone could grind in weeks.

Once the flour was ground, the miller sold some of it to the baker. The baker made bread, muffins, and cakes out of the flour he got from the miller.

To make dough, the baker mixed a lot of flour with a little bit of water and a little bit of salt. He also added a special ingredient called yeast. The yeast made the bread puff up and rise when it was baked.

Next, the baker kneaded the dough. Kneading dough is like pressing and stretching the dough together lots of different ways to make sure that the ingredients are all evenly mixed and the dough has the right consistency or texture. Certain kinds of bread had to be kneaded for a long time before the dough was ready to bake.

Next, the baker shaped the dough, either by patting it with his hands or rolling it with a rolling pin. Then it was time to put the bread into the oven. In the old days, ovens were brick or stone structures with a fire inside.

When the bread was just the right shade of brown, the baker took it out of the oven and let it cool for awhile. Mmmmm, can't you just smell that wonderful aroma? That's freshly-baked, warm bread, ready to eat!

Bread is still made today in more or less the same way it was made in early America three hundred years ago. The first step is making the dough.

Bakers have to get up extra early—sometimes at two or three o'clock in the morning—to start making dough and start baking bread for their first customers. Even today, in many parts of the world, hungry customers stand outside the bakery door first thing in the morning to buy their bread and other breakfast treats. There is nothing better than fresh-baked goodies to start your day.