

A Return to Tradition: The Significance of Baking During COVID-19

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Abstract

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, baking has been a popular activity for those with more free time at home. News articles about the trend suggest the abundance of free time and the activity's stress-relieving abilities as the main reasons for baking's prevalence, but they fail to recognize the broader cultural implications of the baking craze. This autoethnographic article, from the perspective of someone who started baking more seriously during the pandemic, extends the work of food memory scholars such as David E. Sutton, and suggests that baking's ability to create and evoke memories, its physicality, and the personal connections made and maintained through it are each important reasons for the hobby's popularity during a time of global distress.

Keywords: autoethnography, pandemic baking, "return to the whole," prospective memory

Introduction

When lockdown orders began in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, many people turned to food to pass the time. Bread-making quickly became a trend amongst those working from home or laid off from their jobs, which soon expanded into baking of all kinds. Much has been written about the quarantine baking craze, both in academic journals and in popular media; a simple web search provides articles about the trend from sources as varied as *The Atlantic*, CNBC, and even the Land O'Lakes butter company. While some sources extol the virtues of comfort food in times of stress (Clifford 2020, Gilman 2020), the most common explanation given for baking's rise in popularity is simply the surplus of free or flexible time that many individuals suddenly possessed (Mull 2020); however, the broader cultural implications of the baking craze remain largely overlooked.

This autoethnographic exploration of quarantine baking supports Meredith E. Abarca and Joshua R. Colby's observation that although food memories function sensorily and emotionally within the individual, they are ultimately rooted in wider social and cultural currents (2016: 5). Building on my own experiences as an individual who started baking more seriously during the pandemic after a lifetime of casual baking, I extend the work of food memory scholars such as David E. Sutton, as well as authors of recent articles written on life during the pandemic. I explore baking's ability to create and evoke memories, its physicality, and the personal connections made and maintained through it in order to understand the wider cultural reasons for baking's popularity during COVID-19.

Nostalgia, Memory, and Food

When COVID-19 first arrived in Canada, I was living with a roommate in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and working full-time at an ice cream shop at a popular tourist location. Like

many, my contact with other people was suddenly limited when the virus started to spread and lockdowns began. I was laid off in mid-March and began to receive the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit. My immediate family (consisting of me, my parents who live in Winnipeg, and my older sister who lives in Toronto) spoke regularly through video chat, and when I saw my parents in person, it was outdoors from six feet away; they would bring me things like fresh yeast, homegrown rhubarb, bouquets of flowers from their garden, and almond flour. With more time at home, I started to bake more, and I placed more importance on food preparation and baking—this felt natural to me, as I have always enjoyed cooking and baking in my free time, and now I had more free time than ever before.

At first, I made all sorts of things, from sauerkraut to banana cream pie to candied fruit peels. The fresh yeast my parents gave me at the beginning of quarantine likely contributed to my initial baking output, and I was able to use nearly all of it in things like cinnamon buns and brioche before it spoiled. I returned to work part-time in May of 2020 as case numbers decreased, however, and baking became the only consistent food-related hobby I maintained, with cooking generally demoted to a chore since I had less free time. I continued to work a few times a week throughout the summer, and was able to visit my parents at their home to have dinner on their porch most weeks; I often baked for them as well, using up ingredients from my pantry to make things like pear crumble and galette. Compared to others, my initial experience with the pandemic was relatively mild even though the situation was distressing, as case numbers in Manitoba remained somewhat low throughout the summer.

Like many, my patience and nerves wore thin as lockdowns were constantly imposed and retracted and COVID cases spiked and lowered. My experience in quarantine was further complicated by the fact that I moved to St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador for graduate school at the end of the summer, driving in isolation with my partner across Canada to live in a town where neither of us knew anyone. Since relocating, baking has taken on an even greater importance in my life as a form of stress relief from both school responsibilities and from the effects of prolonged isolation from loved ones. Though my partner cooks most of our meals, I ensure that we always have baked goods in the house, and often experiment with new recipes.

While I have always been a nostalgic person, eager to revisit my childhood and the comfort of the past, an unusual nostalgia for “normal life” emerged within me as we entered into the second year of the pandemic. I wash my hands, wear a mask, and adhere strictly to the social distancing guidelines, though I, like many, want to be out in the world without restriction or fear, to travel, to visit with people, and to experience life outside of my computer screen. As a result, I have found myself resorting to physical domestic activities like baking, sewing, and knitting, in an effort to stay grounded in the physical world. As Svetlana Boym puts it, I am trying to return to “a home that no longer exists” (2010).

I believe that baking, more than any other activity, fulfills my nostalgia for a short time, as it is physically and spiritually satisfying and it instills a sense of that “home” in me. I bake not only because I have the time, but because I find comfort and familiarity in the things that I

make—things like clafoutis, which my mother often made during my childhood; rhubarb and almond cake, from the ingredients my parents brought me outside of my apartment in Winnipeg; and gingerbread, which I delivered to my father for his birthday in the early days of the lockdown. In moving away from home, the sense of comfort and familiarity that baking provides has only grown more important to me as I get to know a new city in isolation.

Anthropologist David E. Sutton applies the concepts of “xenitia” and the “return to the whole,” “prospective memory,” and “synesthesia” to the gastronomic experiences of Greek migrants and inhabitants of the Greek island of Kalymnos in his own work, yet these ideas are equally as relevant in the context of baking and memory during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many feel disconnected from the world in which they find themselves. In his work on food memories, Sutton describes the feeling of “xenitia,” or “absence from home,” that many migrants experience in their new environment. He explains it as “a condition of estrangement, absence, death, or of loss of social relatedness” (2005: 305) that results in a painful desire to “return to the whole” through sensuous, material experiences when migrants encounter insurmountable cultural differences. Certainly, the feeling of xenitia and the desire to “return to the whole” are apparent as I reflect on my own life since the beginning of the pandemic; losing a year of normal daily life and social interaction to a global event outside of our control is alienating and distressing, and it seems understandable that we would be “looking for firm ground under [our] feet” (Thomassen in Sutton 2005: 306). Sutton himself notes that xenitia’s socially estranging effects can be relevant not just to literal migrants who have resettled in other parts of the world, but to anyone experiencing the sensation of being “foreign,” whether it be spatially- or temporally-based.

One translation of “xenitia” is “exile” (Papalexandrou 2010), an appropriate term to use in reference to the sense of displacement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as so much of the world has been exiled from itself for the past year. With the feeling of exile comes the desire for familiarity and comfort. In their 2020 article “A Humanities-Based Explanation for the Effects of Emotional Eating and Perceived Stress on Food Choice Motives during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Shen et al. note that their survey of American adults found that the stress of the pandemic likely resulted in greater rates of emotional eating, which caused individuals to select foods based on “mood, convenience, sensory appeal, price, and familiarity” over health, natural content, weight control, and ethical concern (2020: 5). With regard to familiarity, they write that, “Familiar foods can bring up warm nostalgic feelings that can comfort us. They remind us of who we are, grounding our personal histories in larger historical movements and reminding us of continuity when the future is uncertain” (2020: 10).

When I prepare and eat certain foods under pandemic conditions, I recall past instances when I have shared them with people who I can no longer see in person: the weekend mornings of my childhood, when my father made blueberry pancakes; friends’ birthday parties, for which I baked my granny’s hot milk sponge cake; and the beginning of the Christmas season, signaled by my great-grandmother’s doughnut recipe. These foods, rooted in personal tradition, are the closest I can get to physically returning to the past, yet

they also call to mind the future, and the possibility of physically reuniting with loved ones. The necessary continuity that food maintains between past, present, and future parallels Sutton's concept of "prospective memory," through which individuals and communities, "plan in the present to remember food events in the future" (2001: 19); during the pandemic, I have made each personally significant recipe with this goal in mind. When the rest of life is disjointed both from past "normal life" and from the unknown future, food events, rooted firmly in the everyday, ensure the perpetuation of traditions.

In addition to providing comfort and familiarity, baking is, of course, a fun and relaxing hobby—a way to pass the time when there is suddenly more of it to fill than usual. Certainly, many Canadians found themselves with plenty of time on their hands as COVID-19 lockdowns began—in mid-March of 2020, over 500,000 people applied for unemployment insurance in one week, as opposed to the 27,000 applications received in the same week a year earlier (Deaton 2020: 144). As the days at home blurred together in the winter of 2020, I found that rather than measuring time with a calendar, I had begun to mark the weeks by the amount of bread my partner and I had eaten; by now, I am well aware when I make bread that the two loaves I bake will last for about two weeks. Because it has become such a regular event at this point, I do not recall each instance of bread-baking in detail even though I measure the weeks in loaves; what I do remember are the new recipes I try, whether they be traditional family recipes, like my grandmother's brownies, or recipes making their rounds in my friend group, like galette. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the amount of socialization and movement that many of us were used to, meaning that our memories are no longer aided as often through orally retelling stories of our experiences or through the transitions between geographical space that we made more frequently before lockdowns began (Hammond 2020). The fact that our days pass by in very predictable ways only adds to this memory fog, as our brains are programmed to prioritize unusual memories over the mundane (Grabmeier 2017).

As Sutton and others have shown, however, taste and memory are closely linked, even sharing the same neural pathways—the hippocampus is crucial in the development of "declarative or explicit memories," in addition to emotions, senses, and basic drives like thirst and hunger (Allen 2012: 152). This explains why food can be so comforting on a physiological level—taking us back to a romanticized past inaccessible by other means—and why baking memories stand out to me amidst the monotony of life in lockdown. In physical isolation from friends and family, I have largely replaced social memories with baking memories: bagels, doughnuts, croissants, coconut buns. Baking allows me to simultaneously recall old times while making memories for the future; food is a powerful tool for breaking up the blur of time.

Embodiment Through Baking

I have noticed, during my last few bread-baking sessions, that I have finally memorized the recipe¹ I use for white sandwich bread after slowly learning the measurements, method, and timing over the past year. Aside from food's ability to call up old memories and to create new ones, food preparation can be a memory-building activity in itself because of its physical nature. You cannot learn to make bread simply by reading the words on a page; you must learn about the weight, the texture, the temperature of the dough as it moves

through the phases of mixing, kneading, and rising, and your body must absorb these feelings and carry them.

Baking's physicality also creates a sense of agency. At the beginning of the pandemic, when store shelves were empty and there was little knowledge about the spread and symptoms of COVID-19, it was nice to know that I could still take flour, yeast, sugar, salt, oil, and water and make a loaf of bread. Shen et al. recognize this as well, stating that cooking and baking can, "enable us to feel that we still have some control over our lives during a time in which control over many other aspects is uncertain" (2020: 10); they even speculate that the rise in baking's popularity during lockdown could be explained by this sense of control.

I agree that the feeling of agency created through baking is important to the trend's success, though I argue that it is not a complete explanation. Baking's ability to reproduce positive nostalgic feelings that "speak through our senses [...] reflecting visceral self-awareness" (Abarca and Colby 2016: 7) is just as (if not more) important to baking's popularity as the sense of power we feel throughout the process. During a time when bodies are highly regulated sites of fear and discomfort, easily capable of catching and spreading a deadly virus, food preparation is an example of positive embodiment that provides physical and emotional comfort and sustenance.

Laura Siragusa writes about her experiences as an Italian immigrant making sourdough bread during the lockdown in Finland. She describes how she began to focus on her breathing and on the quietness while she kneaded the dough, and notes the range of senses involved in the process:

Through my hands, my nose, my eyes, I am directly, sensually, and materially intertwined to another living being [...] [the starter's] responsiveness and reaction has agency on how I perform when I refresh him, as I knead harder or softer, faster or more slowly, add water or flour, depending on his texture, which suggests that we attune affectively in these activities. (2020: 90)

Siragusa's passage effectively captures the tangible satisfaction felt with successful baking; the practice forces you to focus with every relevant sense on what is in front of you, and to use your lived experience to guide you towards the right dough texture, the right amount of rise. While my own experiences with baking are generally not quite as meditative as Siragusa describes, baking still allows me to take my mind off of outside events and live solely in the present, resting my eyes from the strain of the screen and placing my focus on my other senses.

Part of the appeal of baking, then, must be in the fact that the activity does not require reliance on a screen when so much of life in quarantine occurs online. Though using technology can be (and often is) helpful and joyous, engaging with a physical object like dough cannot lead you down the rabbit holes of distressing news stories that so frequently result from online activities. Echoing Sutton's assertion that objects, as loci of shared cultural memory, enable a "return to the whole" (2005: 305), Shen et al. write, "Aesthetic objects and activities engage our senses, focusing our attention on the experience at hand

and taking our minds off of other issues, including the current pandemic situation” (2020: 10). If eating facilitates a “return to the whole” through taste-based food memory, the act of baking is a “return to the whole” through touch-based food memory, removing us from existing worries, forcing us to slow down, and reminding us of the good our bodies can do as we ground ourselves in the present through enjoyable physical labor.

The perception of baking as leisurely has remained relatively stable throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In pre-pandemic life, the possibility of baking and cooking for fun hinged on the class- and gender-based ability to “experience the home as a site of leisure rather than labor,” which, “rests on a relatively clear demarcation of the temporal relations between public and private spheres” (Hollows 2003: 240). While the spatiotemporal distinction between work and leisure collapsed for people who began working from home during quarantine (Easterbrook-Smith 2020: 4), the distinction between baking as leisure and cooking as labor became more obvious in my life.

Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith asserts that this distinction between cooking and baking, two activities that seem so similar, is due to “baking’s contingent meaning as predominantly leisurely in the quarantine context” (2020: 4). They propose that baking bread during the COVID-19 isolation period serves three purposes: providing physical nourishment, filling free time with “distraction and comfort” (2020: 2), and presenting a new skill to document on social media. Because the end product is “incidental rather than central” (2020: 4) to the point of baking during the pandemic, baking retains its status as largely a leisure activity.

Even during the period in which I was at home all day and out of work, cooking, although necessary for survival, became a recurring chore at times; baking, on the other hand, remained a joyous activity, neither necessary for survival nor required to fulfill daily nutritional requirements, and often not motivated by physical hunger. My interest in baking has only grown over the course of the pandemic, and has increasingly involved yeast and homemade pastry dough, both of which I did not have as much time to learn about prior to lockdown. While my first-time baking efforts are never perfect (and are sometimes rather unsightly), I have never made something inedible. The exactness of baking, which requires specific amounts of ingredients and specific processes and timings, is more calming to me than cooking, which I often find stressful due to its improvised nature and its variability; this is likely why baking remains a fun and incidentally productive hobby as the pandemic wears on.

From my position, it seemed as though the entire world slowed down when the lockdown began—friends were sending letters and learning to knit and sew, people had more time for long walks and drives outside of the city, and my parents both had more time at home to work on the garden and built big raised beds where they grew vast quantities of vegetables in the warmer months. For me, and many around me, there was no better time to take up baking, an activity that tends to require large amounts of free or flexible time.

Of course, my position was one of relative privilege; although I returned to work later in the pandemic at a point when case numbers were low in Manitoba, the business I worked for made the wise choice to lay off its employees when the lockdown first began. I qualified

for the Emergency Response Benefit and it covered my cost of living; I did not need to worry about time or money. However, for many who have worried about time or money during the pandemic, and who have not had much of either, it seems that the baking trend generally has been inaccessible for several reasons. As Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith points out, even having the option to bake depends on whether one has the money for equipment and ingredients, and whether they have their own kitchen with a full oven rather than a hot plate or microwave (2020: 3). Even with the proper materials, many people simply have not been able to take on time-intensive hobbies—particularly people (and especially women) who have had to accommodate their children’s homeschooling and additional cleaning duties (Nienhuis and Lesser 2020: 2), and low-income essential workers who have worked throughout the pandemic with little reprieve. For these reasons, the demographic of individuals involved in the baking craze in Canada likely skews towards the upper middle class, or at least towards those for whom CERB or Employment Insurance² covers necessary expenses.

With regard to essential workers, while the personal protective equipment required for many essential jobs—from the full body suits worn by medical workers to the masks and plexiglass protecting food service employees—aids in physical well-being, it simultaneously fragments the senses, privileging vision and hearing and demoting touch, smell, and taste. Synesthesia—“the way that the different senses elaborate on each other, rather than being considered separate domains of experience” (Sutton 2005: 312)—is severely stunted by this fragmentation, limiting the possibility of “returning of the whole”, and thus the possibility of true and positive embodiment. Because workers are seeing less of their friends and family, and thus are having fewer social interactions outside of work in order to limit the chance of viral transmission, the “physical and spiritual pain” of xenitia must also be felt, and the opportunities to “return to the whole” must be infrequent with so little time to cook, bake, and enjoy eating.

Maintaining Connections



Photo 1. The last birthday cake I made before the pandemic: a chocolate cake for my mother. Winnipeg, October 13, 2019. Photo: Juliana Young.

I have baked throughout my life, and while it has largely been on a casual basis, I can recall periods of free time when I spent most of my time baking (and thinking about baking) specific foods: muffins, cinnamon buns, cookies, breads. Both of my parents bake as well: my father tends to make the everyday staples like muffins and bread, while my mother generally makes things like meringues and tarts for holidays and other special occasions. My sister is no different, and she has also had the time to bake more during the pandemic. Given the significance of baking in my personal family history, and given that baked goods are often social foods, it feels natural to me to share what I make with friends and family.



Photo 2. A rhubarb and almond cake from the early days of the pandemic. Winnipeg, June 21, 2020. Photo: Juliana Young.

When the pandemic began, many of us turned to social media to stay connected with our loved ones. Easterbrook-Smith suggests that the pandemic baking trend arose with this tendency, partially as a way to “demonstrate one’s skill and activities on social media, allowing connection to wider social groups in the absence of face-to-face contact” (2020:2). In addition to its benefits in the realms of memory and embodiment, baking does provide the opportunity for social connection in both personal and public settings.

Though I do not have an enormous social media presence, my past activity on Instagram shows that I tend to post a photo on my “story” (which remains visible on my profile for 24 hours) almost every time I make something that is not white bread or cookies—bagels, brioche, cinnamon buns, clafoutis, croissants, doughnuts, pumpkin tarts, stollen. I will be

the first to admit that when I post the food I bake on social media, it has the double function of updating my friends and followers on my recent activity and demonstrating my proficiency at a skill that not all possess—“a performance which it [is] possible to fail at” (2020: 4), as Easterbrook-Smith puts it.

When I try a recipe or a baking method for the first time and I am aware that my skill level is not high enough to show off, I couch my post with the invariable phrase, “First try at [type of food]”; this phrase works to deflect criticism by indicating that I am aware that I am not yet highly skilled at making what is depicted, given that it is my first time baking it. Since I am posting a photo, my first attempt must have turned out relatively well, ergo it must be impressive that I had never made it before—this train of thought exemplifies the highly curated, performative nature of social media, where one requires personal knowledge of Internet customs to execute actions adequately; the fact that I only noticed this tendency when I went back to look at my social media activity for this paper further exposes how ingrained web conventions can become within us. In my own case, then, public social media performance is not the most honest means of connecting with others over food.



Photo 3. One of many “first tries”: Coconut buns for my partner’s birthday. St. John’s, March 16, 2021. Photo: Juliana Young.

In analyzing private messages from family and friends during the pandemic, it is clear that the posts I make about baking receive more attention than most of my other Instagram stories do. Certain friends only reply to my stories when I post photos of baking, which could indicate either that we have a common interest in the process itself, or that, in the words of one of my friends who commented on a photo of the brioche I made, they “really want to eat that bread.” Of course, while social media has been beneficial for maintaining contact with loved ones during isolation, interactions on a public platform with different posts constantly vying for attention can only go so deep; we must also consider the ways in which the physical act of baking affects personal connections outside of social media.

Throughout the pandemic, my family has maintained regular daily contact through a group chat. While we keep one another updated on COVID-19 case numbers and the rollout of vaccines in our areas, the majority of our text conversation revolves around updates on three things: the family dog, household decor and maintenance, and foods we have been making and eating. It would be false to state that food photos alone keep us in contact, as each of these subjects elicits an enthusiastic response from my family members, but messages about food seem to garner the most visceral, engaged replies—"A tragedy!" In response to a photo of an empty Ganong chocolate box, or "We'll be right over" from my father when I have made a Dutch baby pancake for breakfast halfway across the country.

I suspect that pictures of good food receive such passionate responses both because making something delicious is an accomplishment that we can all relate to, and because when we see the images, we are filled with envy based on our previous experiences with similar varieties of foods. In the case of family, we may also share collective memories of previous experiences, adding further layers of meaning to the foods that we cannot physically share with one another. Lin T. Humphrey writes that, "Both the word and the concept of tradition imply power, the power of continuity and stability" (1989: 168); In sharing images of food, we are perhaps trying to maintain some sense of familial tradition while distant from one another, thus distracting ourselves from current global events by reminding us of the seemingly more stable past.

David Sutton notes that imagining tastes and smells is not as easy as recalling colors or sounds; he states that we often use related images to reference scents (2005: 310), which approximate the feelings that smells evoke yet fail to replicate the synesthetic quality inherent to smells. Indeed, we cannot experience embodied memories through sight alone, nor by looking at photos of personally significant foods can we truly feel the comfort that results from their flavors and from the memories that have come to be associated with them. It is deeply important to speak with friends and family and to keep up with them, but I have found that recreating emotionally significant foods is an effective method to experience a closer connection over a physical distance. As Jillian Gould writes, cooking can bring us back to different periods of our lives that are now past, and can strengthen family bonds across both time and space (2017: 103).

The food my mother makes during Christmas is an essential part of our holiday tradition, and I cannot remember any Christmas without her baking. We do not eat these foods at any other time of the year, so they evoke strong memories for me of my childhood and my parents' home in the winter, warm and brightly lit, with a fire burning in the woodstove. Each year, my mother makes my great-grandmother's recipe for doughnuts to signal the beginning of the holiday season. It is not Christmas without the doughnuts; while my mother bakes other special things like butter tarts and my paternal grandmother's stollen, the day my mother makes the doughnuts has always been the one time every member of my family, regardless of how busy we are, gathers together in the kitchen to roll the doughnuts in sugar and eat them fresh from the pot. It is an annual ritual, and as Humphrey, Humphrey, and Samuelson note, rituals "function to mediate our passage" (1988: 4) through life.

COVID-19 has fractured many cultural and personal traditions over the past year; we have had to either skip them altogether, or alter them so they might continue within a new (and often virtual) context. But as Anne Kaplan writes, "It is a sentimental fallacy that change is an enemy of tradition... [people] constantly alter traditions to fit their lives; a static tradition is... a dead one" (1986: 3). Because I moved to Newfoundland, I was unable to safely return home to Winnipeg in the winter of 2020 to celebrate the holiday at my parents' home. I still felt obligated, however, to continue my mother's baking traditions and to make the donuts for myself and my partner, even though I had only helped my mother make them a handful of times throughout my life. Donut-making was redefined in my house as a group tradition this year, as my partner fried the doughnuts in oil once I had prepared the dough. I proved that experiential physical learning is imperative in baking (Sutton 2013: 303), as the first batch of doughnuts came out of the pot rock-hard due to the amount of flour I mistakenly added while trying to reach what I believed to be the proper consistency. Although the texture was unlike the donuts my mother has made in the past, the flavor was perfect.

The first bites of donut created a physical and emotional connection with my family that text and images alone could not provide; the flavor of Christmas at home was there, even if I could not be at home. Food memories are effective precisely because of their ability to build and strengthen relationships, and to represent whole eras and identities (Sutton 2008: 178). Sutton describes a Greek woman living in Germany who laughs and cries upon receiving a package from home containing Kalymnian honey: "Such moments of wholeness are bittersweet and temporary," he explains, "a reminder of a homeland the return to which is deferred. Yet the soothing fullness also suggests that such moments give the migrants the strength to carry on with their xenitia" (2005: 308). Eating the donut, I knew the feeling of "fullness" would not last and that the context of the tradition had changed, yet having a physical, synesthetic reminder of my family gave me something tangible to hold on to as I spent my first Christmas in a new city. When I eat donuts with my family next year, I will carry this new memory with me.

Future and Tradition

In a letter to a friend one month into the lockdown, I wrote that I felt like a 1950s housewife, both because activities like baking, cooking, and knitting filled most of my days, and because, given that I had fewer places to visit, the domestic spheres of the grocery store and the home had become my primary domain. Although I described a simplified caricature of a housewife in my letter, ignoring the difficult and troubling aspects of the role, I believe that there is some truth to the suggestion that many of us have started to take more interest in feminine-coded activities like baking, cooking, canning, and gardening, because all of our time is spent in the traditionally feminine domestic realm. Amanda Mull (2020) notes that home baking has declined in recent decades largely because women have entered the workforce in greater numbers. With nobody at home full-time anymore, households have turned to grocery stores and bakeries for their baked goods. Now that we find ourselves at home once more, it feels comforting to play the stereotypical hospitable maternal role—even if we are just performing for ourselves—because these activities are firmly embedded in our conceptions of home and domesticity.

Prior studies show that women globally completed the majority of cooking prior to lockdown (Wolfson et al. 2021), even while working full-time jobs. Early data on gendered cooking patterns during the pandemic show that women in the United Kingdom and the United States still perform a disproportionate amount of daily meal preparation (Zhou et al. 2020, Swan 2020), so while I do not expect a shocking difference in the gender distribution of domestic tasks in later research on the topic, perhaps the mainstream visibility and popularity of home-based activities during the pandemic will at least lead to a broader and more permanent appreciation of domestic labor within our culture.

The increased interest in baking is only a small part of a larger recognition of the importance of home, of domestic labor, and of a more equal work-life balance, spurred by the changes that we have experienced in our daily lives due to the pandemic. While I dream of returning to a “normal life” free of COVID-19, staying home for such a long period of time has allowed me to imagine possible utopias based upon my experiences. Recent scholarship shows that I am not alone in my imagination, as workplaces have begun to recognize the benefits of reducing weekly office hours and allowing employees to work from home more often even after the pandemic ends (BBC 2020). Other research suggests that the “local food” movement is gaining interest and should continue to do so after COVID (Hobbs 2020:175), which will help to improve food security in urban areas (Lal 2020: 873).

Considering these advances in combination with the increased interest in traditional food preparation activities, as well as pastimes like sewing and knitting, it seems as though people are growing increasingly weary of the disembodied, alienating reality of life under capitalism; recent studies present the pandemic as an ideal time to imagine postcapitalist worlds (Mueller, McCollum, and Schmidt 2020, Rab and Kettler 2020). While it would be a stretch to say that these trends will have any effect on our current economic system aside from benefiting it through the purchasing of materials, it is encouraging that these possibilities, based in tradition, are providing alternatives to rampant consumerism.

My pandemic experience suggests that the intangible benefits of baking—evoking, creating, and sustaining memory; providing an outlet for positive and grounding physical exertion; and maintaining connections with loved ones—are just as important as the physical results of the process. I believe that these benefits might possibly provide insights into the COVID-19 baking trend more generally. Many people found themselves with more free time than ever before during lockdown, giving them the opportunity to further develop their baking skills; however, we cannot attribute the increased popularity in baking during the pandemic simply to an abundance of time, as individuals could conceivably have chosen any other activity to fill their days.

The unprecedented nature of the pandemic has caused many people to feel estranged from others and from “normal” life, and food, given its presence in everyday life, has allowed us to maintain a connection with the “normal.” Specifically, baking provides us with a tangible link to the past within the present, and creates new memories during a time when days blur together. Although cooking and other food-related activities can provide similar benefits, baking as an inherently synesthetic activity grounds each of our senses in the

present through the motions of kneading and rolling, and unlike cooking, remains an entirely recreational activity for many. Because food is a universal experience, baking can also help us connect with our kin across time and space, collapsing distances and providing the opportunity to continue old traditions in new contexts.

Life has gone through countless iterations in the past year, changing with each piece of breaking news; the way we think about and interact with food has evolved as well. Food has transitioned from the area of fear and uncertainty that it occupied at the beginning of the pandemic—when ingredients were scarce and we were advised to wash groceries with soap and water—to one of comfort and familiarity as food systems have become more reliable and we have learned more about the spread of the virus. It remains to be seen whether baking will persist as a popular activity as vaccination levels rise and more areas begin to reopen. I suspect that some will continue to bake more than they did before the pandemic began, having learned new skills and methods during the lockdowns, while others will hastily return to their busy schedules and acclimate once more to “normal life.” I will continue to bake sandwich bread as needed, and as long as the process remains leisurely, I will find the free time for it. It is my hope that we recall the joys of food and baking in future times of distress and uncertainty, be they personal or global.

Notes:

¹Found here: <https://www.tasteofhome.com/recipes/basic-homemade-bread/>.

²The Canadian government implemented CERB (the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit) in April of 2020, which initially provided \$2,000 CAD per month for up to four months as a taxable benefit to those whose employment was affected by the pandemic. CERB only applied to those who had not voluntarily quit their jobs but were currently unemployed or working less due to the pandemic, made more than \$5,000 CAD in the previous year, and were earning under \$1,000 CAD per month; it also applied to those who were unable to work because they contracted COVID-19 or were caring for someone with the virus. The program ended in September of 2020, and those who were still unemployed either received employment insurance if they were eligible, or were switched to one of several other new pandemic response programs if they were not. Those ineligible for EI include those who quit (without cause) or were fired from their previous job, those on strike, and those who have not worked for the necessary number of insurable hours in the last year.

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