

## Memories of mom rise with the yeast

My mom bakes bread in a pink and blue kitchen. She regrets this color scheme, calling it a youthful mistake, but last time I looked, the cabinets were still a dusty rose color and the floor tiles a warm salmon. Before she begins baking, she takes off her wedding ring and puts it in an antique blue china egg cup, on a shelf above the sink. Then she pulls out a faded recipe card and carefully, methodically, lays out the ingredients. Eggs, butter, sugar, flour and yeast start to crowd for space on the counter.

I know the breadmaking has begun in earnest when I hear the whirring of the cobalt blue KitchenAid mixer. Then it's the thump, thwack, thump of Mom's hands kneading the dough and smacking it against the counter. She divides it into three loaves, like the three of us: Mom, Dad and me. Soon, the warm, yeasty smell of egg bread fills our house.

What is it about that smell? Why does it make me feel safe inside? I love all my mom's baked goods: pancakes with real Vermont maple syrup and squares of melting butter, sugary scones with strawberries and cream, pumpkin muffins to perfectly complement a bowl of zucchini soup. But somehow, everything pales in comparison with her bread. It's an edible link to my past.

One whiff of Mom's egg bread unlocks a treasury of childhood memories. Rachel Herz's *The Scent of Desire*, about the psychology of smell, made me understand why. A memory triggered by scent always causes an emotional reaction. Always. That's because odors travel first to your amygdala (your brain's emotions center) before they're even cognitively processed. So when I catch a whiff of homemade bread, I get an instant and powerful emotional response.

This response goes even deeper than simple memory-unlocking. The first time you smell something, your mind permanently connects it to a place — or a person. Since I was a girl, my mind has linked bread to Mom, and that has never changed. I feel connected to her when I eat a thick slice of homemade bread. I see her hands wrapping a faded apron around her waist, her slender fingers massaging the dough. That bread is an extension of her.

I helped when I was little. While she kneaded, I formed Lilliputian loaves from cast-off dough — little doll-loaves made by tiny fingers, flattened with a miniature rolling pin, baked in a small toaster oven.

With so much early practice, I should be a master baker by now. I'm not. A few years ago, I attempted to re-create Mom's bread, and ended up with something resembling flatbread instead of puffy, leavened loaves. I've been too intimidated to try again.

Until now.

A writing teacher challenged me to bake my mother's recipe, and I accepted. Although I still live at home, I snubbed Mom's assistance. This was my bread version of Iron Chef America. No help, no tips, no teamwork. Just me and the recipe. Mom was dying to help. She kept popping her head into the kitchen and saying things like, "Even Julia Child needed help at first." I ignored her, grabbing two eggs, damp and cold from the fridge, and piling them beside the mound of dry ingredients. Mom was appalled at my lack of order.

I banned her from the kitchen.

Making bread myself was different. Instead of noticing the relaxing purr of the mixer, I battled my ingredients. Flour rebelled, covering the pink tile floor like a blanket of snow. The colorful packages of Fleischmann's RapidRise Yeast refused to mix with the flour. They scattered like beige confetti on the counter. At one point, I was convinced the mixer itself was coming alive, as it rocked ominously on the counter. (I had forgotten to press the "lock" button.)

But it wasn't all agony. There was some ecstasy, too.

Usually I notice the sounds and smells of Mom baking bread. When I baked, it was color that intrigued me: A heaping teaspoon of cinnamon reminded me of the burnt umber of fall leaves; butter and sugar melting in a saucepan swirled together like a Van Gogh sky; and the sugar in a blue china bowl shined like glitter.

When I finally put three loaves in the oven — two egg bread, one cinnamon — I felt triumphant. The smell of baking bread wafted through the house, the smell I remember from my childhood.

By 8 p.m., after a long afternoon of mixing, kneading, waiting anxiously for the loaves to rise and bake, the timer announced that my bread was ready. I let it cool slightly and cut three slices: one for Dad, one for Mom and one for me. The crust was golden brown, the inside warm, egg-yellow and chewy. Melted butter dripped onto my pink plate.

And the judge's verdict?

"This is even better than my bread," Mom said. "You'll have to tell me your secret."

**>>moderate**

Homemade Egg Bread

8 to 9 cups bread flour  
1 tablespoon salt  
3 packages RapidRise yeast  
1/2 cup (1 stick) butter  
1/2 cup sugar  
2 cups spring water  
2 eggs

Optional, for one loaf cinnamon bread:

2 tablespoons butter, at room temperature

Cinnamon-sugar mixture (2 tablespoons sugar and 1 heaping teaspoon cinnamon)

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Grease three 8- by 4- by 2-inch loaf pans.

In a large mixing bowl, stir together 3 cups bread flour, salt and yeast.

Melt butter in a medium saucepan. Add sugar and water; stir. Remove from heat and stir in eggs. Return pan to burner and stir constantly over medium heat until temperature reaches 120 to 130 degrees on a thermometer.

Add warm liquid to flour mixture, stirring with a wooden spoon until combined. Beat with electric mixer on high speed for 3 minutes. Continue adding flour, 1/2 cup at a time, mixing on medium-low or kneading speed after each addition, until you reach 8 to 9 cups of flour total, or until dough cleans the sides of mixing bowl and is smooth and elastic.

Remove dough from bowl and knead by hand for a few minutes, adding in additional dusting of flour as necessary. Shape into a large ball, cover with a clean, damp kitchen towel, and allow to rest for 10 minutes.

After dough has rested, shape into a log and divide into thirds, using a bread knife. Shape each third into a ball; cover two of the balls with the damp towel.

Roll the first ball into a large rectangle with a rolling pin. Stretch dough into shape as needed. For cinnamon bread, spread with 1 to 2 tablespoons softened butter, leaving edges clear, then sprinkle with cinnamon-sugar mixture. Starting with the short side of the rectangle, roll bread into a log, pressing lightly with hands as you roll to prevent air bubbles from forming. Pinch edges under to seal. Place loaf in greased pan.

Repeat with remaining two balls of dough, leaving out the cinnamon-sugar part. Place pans on top of warm oven and cover with the damp towel. Allow to rise for 45 to 60 minutes, or until top of dough rises above lip of pans.

Bake in a 375-degree oven for 25 to 30 minutes, or until golden brown. Remove from pans and cool on wire racks for 15 to 20 minutes before slicing.

Makes 3 loaves.