

The Monday after Christmas was Baking Day. This has come to be a bit of a tradition here on Coe Creek, although the date and time might vary. A family member as obsessed with good food as I am comes when she is in the area, and we bake together. Usually, this has been at Christmas time, although we did manage a session once earlier this past year, too.

Most often, we have baked sweet delicacies that are so tempting at holiday times. We have made regional and ethnic specialties, yeast breads and cookies, and numerous flatbreads. We have made Italian panettone, Norwegian lefse, Swedish kaka, and Norwegian krumkaker. We always sample what we have made, usually with homemade butter and jam, or with cheese and herbs, or with pesto or herring, or just “as is,” pretty much as it comes out of the oven.

This week, we did something a little different. We had originally intended to make two baked items, but my partner in this endeavor showed me the recipe from the big Nordic Cookbook, and I scrapped the idea I had settled on, an historic recipe for a rolled Norwegian cookie. I wanted to concentrate on the recipe my baking companion had found.

So, we made crisp bread—hardtack, some call it—or Swedish knäckebröd, and it was not only a success, it was so good that it will certainly become one of those recipes I consider a “staple.”

I had tried to make a rye crisp bread before. In fact, I had used several different recipes from time to time, but none of them had been “keepers.” Most of them, we found, were really hard rather than crisp, and whoever consumed them was in danger of needing a hot line to a dentist!

So, it was with great uncertainty that we embarked on yet another attempt to make a crisp, but not tooth-shattering, crackly rye bread that would replace the purchased Wasa bread or Siljan hardtack we liked to have on hand. During these many months of the Covid pandemic, we have not been in grocery stores, so our favorite crisp breads have not been in our cupboards.

We tweaked the recipe we found this week, though. It appeared that the amount of yeast required must have been an error, so we used our own judgement about that. And, we added a little sourdough starter for good measure. Otherwise, the ingredients were pretty simple: rye flour, unbleached wheat flour, milk, and salt. The recipe actually did not call for salt, and it also included aniseed, but none of us like that very much, so our dough was seasoned only with salt.

The dough was very stiff. We wondered if it was going to make another impossible to bite hard bread. But, we followed the recipe, and when we began to bake the breads, the aroma told us that, however the texture was, it was going to taste very good.

I can only say—the bag that held our finished breads is empty. That rye knäckebröd was delicious. It was crispy, crackly, and it shattered when we broke it. It was so good, that tomorrow, another batch is the order of the day.

We anticipate Baking Day or more than just recipe testing. We also discuss food on a deeper level than is common from day to day as we use the products of our labor to put finished meals on our tables. We talk about how

food—and our eating choices—are, in a very real way—environmental, cultural, and political statements. And our choices also affect, for good or ill, our physical and mental health. We discuss the ethnic and cultural reasons we eat what we do, and we delve into food history as it has played out in our own families.

We often wish that we could experience Baking Day several times a year. But, in the long intervals between those hours we spend together in the kitchen, we are sure to keep in touch through exchanging information, recipes, and food lore. And, every time I mix up and bake a batch of the crisp bread we made this week, I will think back to the fun we had on Baking Day.