

The Story of Bread



Bread is the oldest of all the foods manufactured by man. It also ranks as the most widely eaten, and is often called the staff of life. For thousands of years, people throughout the world have eaten bread in its many different forms. The earliest breads were hard and flat. They were made from a mixture of ground grain and water, and baked in the sun or on hot rocks. Most breads today are leavened, or raised with yeast, baking powder or baking soda.

The bread most widely eaten in the United States is white enriched, sliced and wrapped loaf. But a wide variety of other breads are also made by bakeries in most parts of the country. These include whole wheat, cracked wheat, light and dark ryes, pumpernickel, and Swedish, French and Italian loaves. Corn bread or corn pone is especially popular in the South. Special breads contain nuts, raisins, dates or cinnamon.

Farmers in the United States grow many different kinds of wheats and other grains to make the flours necessary for the various kinds of breads.

People of other countries prefer different kinds of bread. In the Orient millions of people eat bread made from rice. In Scotland, oatcakes and bannocks made of barley meal are popular. The peoples of Central America enjoy tortillas, or flat cakes of cornmeal dough baked on a non-greased griddle. West Indians make bread flour from the roots of the cassava plant.

Seeds from various wild grasses were long used as foods. Many grains, including oats, corn, barley, rye and rice have been made into breads. Each gives the bread a distinctive taste, color, and texture, but wheat and its ancestors made the most popular breads.

Man found that he could plant seeds that grew and multiplied. He settled in regions where grains grew well, such as the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Near East.

The Egyptians are usually credited for making the first leavened bread. Leavening changed the character of bread completely. From a hard flat loaf, it became soft, light, and filled with air. Spores from the yeast plants floating in the air may have settled on some of the baker's dough. The yeast fed on the sugars in the mixture and grew. They could not escape from the thick dough, so the multiplying cells expanded the mass into a larger, lighter, more porous substance. The Egyptians also built the first ovens. The lighter bread needed a heated, enclosed area so that the larger mass of dough would bake through. The principles used in making breads are still followed today.