



Our daily bread

Anglo-Saxon loaves were far from the fluffy farmhouse one might buy today, but the table would have been empty without them, says Neil Buttery, as Lammas approaches

THE importance of bread to the Anglo-Saxons cannot be overstated. Life was focused upon its production: growing, harvesting, milling and baking, requiring input from the whole community. Bread was the focus of every meal and the 10th-century manuscript *Ælfric's Colloquy* informs us that, without it, 'every table would seem empty, and without bread all food would be distasteful'.

The Anglo-Saxons conquered and dominated the area of Britain that would become known as England from the 5th century until they were eventually conquered by the Normans in 1066. At first, they were Pagans, but Christianity would be adopted by the various kingdoms over time in a mosaic fashion. Lammas, held on

‘The Lammas loaf was brought into church as an offering,’

August 1, marked the beginning of the season called *hærfest*, from which we get the word 'harvest'. The word *lammas*, meaning 'loaf-mass' or 'loaf festival', is derived from Latin and is Christian in its source. That the festival existed previously in Pagan Britain is entirely plausible, especially when it came to bread; the harvest *had* to be successful, so why not hedge your bets and appease all the gods, old and new?

Lammas required a sacrifice: the first ripe corn was collected—not much, only enough to make one loaf—then ground and baked. This Lammas loaf wasn't eaten; instead, it was broken into quarters, each piece crumbled into the four corners of the grain store, ensuring good harvest and dry storage. In later years, the Lammas loaf was brought into church

as an offering, marking the start of harvest time and its associated toil and festivities.

Anglo-Saxon bread was far from the fluffy farmhouse one might buy today. For starters, it was unlikely to have been made entirely from wheat. Wheat contains lots of gluten, making for lighter, bouncier dough, but it was expensive to grow, so Anglo-Saxon fields were filled with a mixture of cereals: wheat, barley, oats and rye. At the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon age, barley was the most common cereal grown for bread, but, by the 11th century, wheat had taken over. It was almost always 'cut' with less desirable flour, resulting in loaves such as maslin, made from wheat and rye. Bread could have been made on bakestones, but it was the *ofen* (oven) that gave the loaves—especially those with a proportion of wheat—lift and a delicious, crunchy crust. Dough was leavened with wild yeasts and their accompanying lacto-bacteria, producing sourdough, but the best was leavened with barm, the yeasty froth scooped from the top of brewers' bubbling ale vats.

Our lives may no longer be centred around the making and eating of bread, but its echoes reside in language and society; the words bread (*bræd*) and wheat (*whæt*) have barely changed. Less obvious are 'lord', which comes from the Old English *hlæford* or 'loaf-ward', distributor of bread; and 'lady', from *hlaefdige*, 'kneader of loaves'. This might all sound rather twee and romantic, but the *hlæford* and *hlaefdige* were gatekeepers, strictly controlling the grinding of flour and the baking of bread. If bread was controlled, so were the people who depended upon it, known as *hlafætas* or 'loaf-eaters'. This is the beginning of the English feudal system.

There is another word, however, one that shows how bread, care and community could go hand in hand—that is 'company', derived from the Latin for 'together' (*com*) and 'bread' (*panis*). Friends brought together, their bonds reinforced by the simple act of sharing bread. 🍞

Neil Buttery's book *'Knead to Know: A History of Baking'* (Icon) is out on September 12

Let's Lammas

Maslin was made from the disliked, but cheap rye and the more gluten-rich variety of wheat called spelt. The resulting loaves are heavy, but full of flavour. If you want something lighter, swap the spelt for strong wholemeal flour or even a proportion of white bread flour.

Ingredients (for one loaf)

250g spelt flour
250g rye flour

10g instant yeast
350ml warm water

Method

► Mix the dry ingredients together in a bowl, make a well in the centre and pour in the warm water. Mix well and knead the dough for a good 10 minutes. Bring the dough together into a round and prove in a covered, lightly oiled bowl until doubled in size (about 45 minutes). Meanwhile, flour a lined baking sheet.

► Once risen, make the dough into a ball shape by tucking it under itself and sit it upon the tray. Cover and allow to prove until doubled in size (about 25 minutes). Preheat your oven to 230°C/450°F/gas mark 8.

► Scatter the proved dough with more flour and make two cuts across the top with a serrated knife. Bake on the centre shelf for 30 minutes or until the bottom of the loaf sounds hollow when tapped.