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## FOOD &amp; DINING



MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Sesame-topped Sicilian bread is made using a recipe from an Italian grandma who kneaded the dough in a bowl on a kitchen chair because she was too short to work on a countertop.

# Traditions that rise above

## Immigrants' stories told through holiday bread

BY PEGGY WOLFF  
Tribune Newspapers

Every Christmas, golden-crust-ed loaves sprinkled with sesame seeds came out of Petrina Graziano's oven for her Sicilian family in Milwaukee. Graziano baked the bread by memory, by feel, by heart's leap, filling a mug with flour, sprinkling a handful of this and that. For years, granddaughter Theresa Nemetz stood by her white-haired nonna, watching the sturdy loaf come together.

"My nonna was 4 foot 9 inches, so short that she couldn't work on a countertop, so she put the bowl with the dough on a kitchen chair" and kneaded it and let it rise there. "It's just a simple peasant bread that's yeasty and dense,

a white bread made with wet yeast."

But it's a tradition, and one that reminds Nemetz of her Sicilian great-grandfather who saw no future as a farmhand in the olive groves of Santa Flavia. When he came through Ellis Island, a baker gave him bread. "In New York!" Nemetz recalled. "Y'know, this was America! Someone fed him!" For the rest of his life, he paid back the kindness from his small earnings as a railroad mechanic.

I collected this story and others during an odyssey to find the history of immigration in the Midwest, one loaf at a time, as told by home bread bakers who live under the radar of any acclaim. What did I find? Typical loaves that celebrated Christmas,

Stories of immigrants or their children who longed for their daily breads and the tastes imparted by the ingredients inside.

Czech-speaking immigrants who fled the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19th and early 20th century found a safe haven tucked beside the meandering streams of southeast Nebraska, a region now called the Bohemian Alps. Terese Hesh O'Connell's paternal great-grandparents were among the refugees. After clearing Ellis Island, they homesteaded on a typical Nebraska farm of 80 acres: milo, hard red winter wheat, corn and later soybeans.

When O'Connell added her Grandma Elsie Hesh's houska vanocka recipe to a community cookbook, it was to set down

forever her Czech roots. "It's an egg twist, a Christmas celebration bread, very different from the bread we'd eat on any other day." The lukewarm milk, a key ingredient, came from pasteurizing cow's milk in the basement.

These are stories and recipes of exiles passing through immigration checkpoints, of minds made up, of bodies rescued from communism, from religious persecution, from the potato famine. And, finally, their reckoning with a new terra firma in the Midwest.

But then I met Melina Kelson and her husband, Pete Podolsky, in Skokie, and watched them slide loaves of sprouted sourdough whole wheat and roasted potato boules into their backyard wood-fired oven for their micro-bakery, Bootleg Batard. I knew that our ancestors' baking traditions had come full circle. This scene

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could've taken place in the 19th century: the community oven, the stone-ground wheat from a non-GMO farm and the feeding at home of three lively sourdough cultures that grab wild yeast spores from the air.

But it was the 21st century. A renaissance in bread baking had taken root.

*Peggy Wolff is a freelance writer. The stories and recipes here are excerpted from her upcoming book "Not Since Sliced Bread: Recipes for Traditional Loaves from Midwestern Bakers" (OneBigTable, early 2016).*

## FROM THE COVER



MICHAEL TERCHA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Bohemian Christmas twist makes a large, dense loaf, studded with raisins and almonds.

## Bohemian Christmas twist

**Prep:** 45 minutes**Rise:** About 2 hours**Bake:** 50 minutes**Makes:** 1 large loaf, about 35 slices (1/2-inch slices)

Terese Hesh O'Connell, a registered dietitian from Wilbur, Neb., tinkered with the recipe to combine whole wheat flour with white, "something Grandma Elsie Hesh would never have done. Hers would've been all white flour." The mixture makes for a denser loaf than traditional versions. Lukewarm milk was a key ingredient in this yeasted holiday bread, known as houska to Bohemians and Czechs. Before baking, the huge loaf is assembled in stacked layers of braids. On the bottom is a braid of four strands. The middle layer is a braid of three strands. The top layer is one long strand, folded in half and twisted like a rope, then set on top. To keep layers together while baking, use toothpicks to secure them to each other (see photo). You can also try tamping down the dough a bit on bottom and middle layers, so that the layers above them tuck into the space.

- 1 3/4 to 2 tablespoons dry yeast
- 1 3/4 cup lukewarm milk, about 100 degrees, divided
- 4 cups whole wheat flour
- 4 cups unbleached white flour
- 2 sticks (1/2 pound) unsalted cold butter, cut into pieces
- 1 cup sugar
- 5 eggs, beaten
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, optional
- 1/8 teaspoon mace
- Grated zest of half a lemon
- 1/2 cup blanched almonds, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup golden raisins
- 1 egg, beaten
- Vegetable or canola oil, for greasing



Bohemian Christmas twist: Roll the dough into eight long pieces. For the first layer, left, braid together four pieces. For the middle layer, braid three pieces, then lay it atop the bottom layer. Finally, twist the remaining log and place it on top.



Insert toothpicks between the logs to anchor them to each other so they stay together during baking.

- 1** Dissolve the yeast in 1/2 cup milk.
- 2** In a large bowl, combine flours. Using a wooden spoon or a pastry cutter, work pieces of butter into flour until fine, like cornmeal; set aside a third of this mixture. (This step will make it easier to work the large amount of

- dough.)
- 3** In a medium bowl, dissolve sugar in remaining 1 1/4 cups milk. Stir in the eggs, salt, mace, lemon zest and the yeast mixture.
- 4** Using a wooden spoon, mix well with the flour mixture until it's incorporated. Add the

reserved third of flour mixture, and mix well until a firmer dough forms, about 15 minutes. You may need to work the dough on a countertop with your hands.

- 5** Cover dough with plastic wrap; let rise until doubled in size, about 2 hours.

- 6** Transfer dough to a floured surface. Divide in half. Work almonds and raisins into each half.

- 7** Heat oven to 325 degrees.

- 8** Divide one dough half into 4 pieces. Roll each piece out lengthwise to 16-18 inches; braid the 4 pieces together. Transfer the braid to a greased baking sheet, laying it lengthwise.

- 9** Divide the other dough half into 4 pieces, and set 1 piece aside. Roll the remaining 3 pieces out lengthwise to 16-18 inches, and braid them together. Place lengthwise on top of the first braid.

- 10** Roll the remaining piece out lengthwise to 16-18 inches. Twist it like a rope, fold it in half and place it lengthwise on top of the braided layers.

- 11** Brush loaf with egg. Bake for 50 minutes.

**Nutrition information per slice:** 205 calories, 8 g fat, 4 g saturated fat, 47 mg cholesterol, 30 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein, 20 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

## Sesame-topped Sicilian bread

**Prep:** 30 minutes  
**Rise:** 11 hours, 50 minutes

**Bake:** 35 minutes  
**Makes:** 2 loaves

This recipe from Theresa Nemetz calls for fermenting a biga — a starter of flour, water and yeast — overnight.

- 2 ounces fresh yeast
- 3 cups lukewarm water, about 100 degrees, divided
- 9 to 10 cups flour, divided, plus more for dusting
- 4 teaspoons salt
- 4 teaspoons sugar
- 4 teaspoons vegetable shortening
- Olive oil, for greasing and serving
- 1/2 cup sesame seeds
- Freshly ground black pepper

The night before:

- 1** In a large bowl, dissolve yeast in 1 cup of lukewarm water. Add 2 cups flour; mix well with a wooden spoon until a thick batter is formed. Cover; let dough rise in a warm place until doubled in size, about 10 hours.

Next day:

- 2** Dissolve salt, sugar and shortening in 2 cups lukewarm water; stir into starter. Add 7 cups flour, beating by hand or by stand mixer with dough hook until dough comes together.

- 3** Transfer dough to a floured surface. Knead until no longer sticky, about 10 minutes. Shape into a ball; transfer to a large, greased bowl and let rise in a warm place until doubled, about 35 minutes.

- 4** Transfer dough to a floured surface and knead for 2-4 minutes. Shape into a ball, return to bowl, cover, let rise again until doubled, about 30 minutes.

- 5** Divide in half. Shape each half into a loaf; place on lightly greased baking sheet, cover with towel, let rise until doubled, about 45 minutes. Halfway into the final rise, heat oven to 425 degrees.

- 6** Just before baking, score tops with shallow cuts. Brush olive oil over loaves; sprinkle with sesame seeds. Bake until golden brown, about 35-40 minutes. Cool on wire rack. Serve warm with olive oil seasoned with pepper.

**Nutrition information per serving:** 150 calories, 2 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 28 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein, 297 mg sodium, 1 g fiber