

What have they done to the grain?

It may have escaped the notice of some bakers, but people are going off wheat. It doesn't show up in the health statistics, of course. The medical profession, schooled in nutrition for all of three hours in a five-year degree, admits only the most tenuous connection between what we eat and how we feel. But thousands, if not millions, of people are being diagnosed as intolerant to wheat, gluten, yeast and a good many other basic ingredients. More to the point, those who abandon these foods often feel better.

Ignore the puckered cheeks of the reductionist scientists with their 'insufficient evidence', 'unreliable testing' and 'fashionable hypochondria'. It may not be visible under the microscope, but there is undoubtedly a problem. Wheat and yeast bakers should be worried.

If, as I believe, we may have brought this on ourselves, it could be useful to understand the causes, if only to ensure that we don't make the same mistakes in our headlong rush to manipulate ingredients in the pursuit of profit or convenience or both.

Take wheat. Ever since Mendel, and more particularly in the last 50 years or so, we have had the means to accelerate the production of hybrid varieties. We have selected for yield, pest and disease resistance, milling quality, straw length - anything and everything except nutritional quality. Could it be that, even before the advent of recombinant genetic engineering, we had so altered wheat that it had become unpalatable to a significant proportion of the population? Spelt is, like wheat, a type of triticum. The food historians surmise that modern wheats evolved from spelt-like origins. Curious then, that some people who feel uncomfortable or worse when eating wheat, can tolerate spelt.

Recent years have seen an upsurge of candidiasis, an inflammatory condition produced by the yeast organism *Candida Albicans*. Some of its effects are chronic, irritating and painful. Sufferers are advised to avoid sources of yeast, among them bread. Has yeast, too, become bad for us?

The standard breadmaking manuals of the pre-war period (Kirkland, Bennion etc) give recipes for sponge and dough fermentations using a ratio of compressed yeast to dough weight of around 0.5%. The Master Bakers Book of Breadmaking, published in the 1980s, prescribes up to 1.75% yeast in doughs made by the Chorleywood process. Could it be that by trebling yeast dosage and greatly reducing fermentation time, modern bakers have unwittingly laced their loaves with undesirable yeast residues? Some 40 years of Chorleywood bread amounts to a comprehensive experiment on the population. Perhaps the results are being revealed, not in the pages of the Lancet but in a malaise which is putting people off the very staff of life.

Dismiss all this, if you will, as mere speculation. But the evidence of my postbag and my order book suggests that, whatever the reason, the two ingredients fundamental to the

baker's craft are no longer a source of health for some people. Imaginative and joined-up research is required to understand why. We need to build nutritional quality into the plant breeding programmes and production methods of the future. And we should be asking whether the widespread use of clever enzymes to produce that cloying softness which passes for 'freshness' in much modern bread won't result, a decade or two down the line, in further inexplicable allergies and intolerances. Don't say you weren't warned.

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