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HOW WHITE BREAD BECAME WHITE TRASH

Dreams of Resistance and Status

You're scum, you're fucking white bread.

—David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross*

WHITE TRASH REBELLION?

Somewhere between the Cheez Whiz hors d'oeuvres and the looped Jerry Springer clip, it hit me: the “white trash party” trend of the 2000s was a cultural phenomenon best forgotten, and quickly. Sadly, you can’t hold back a fad this debauched. Fueled by books like *White Trash Cooking* and *White Trash Etiquette*, White Trash Nation websites, college students’ love of Daisy Duke cutoff shorts, and hipsters’ apparently innate affection for trucker hats, the trend only grew. And it grew until, in the words of one awestruck journalist, it shined “brighter than a big, fat ’skeeter getting fried on a bug zapper.”¹ For all that zap-blue brightness, though, white trash chic turned out to be a decidedly murky affair—starting with the strange bedfellows it attracted.²

Reporters, mostly caught up in the pleasure of dabbing the pages of staid venues like *Metropolitan Home* with lines like “Jes’ belly up to the trough and dig in,” or inflecting *New York Times* style with “shonuffs” and “hons,” depicted the trend as a unified phenomenon. In fact, it arose from two very different places. The props were the same for both—a hodgepodge of white bread, processed cheese, southern rock, cheap beer, and pregnant teen costumes. They both reveled in stylized poverty. They both cultivated vulgar ugliness. And both, at

some level, attempted to subvert the pretensions of an imagined elite. But the politics and participants were different.

On one hand, urban hipsters chugging Pabst Blue Ribbon beer in upscale dives dreamt of working-class authenticity, rebelling against high-class consumerism with aestheticized poverty. Hipster white trash chic embraced the “simplicity” of mass-produced commodities as an ironic antidote to yuppie consumption. It assembled cool style out of the kitschy trappings of poverty, but in doing so reinforced the line between hipsters and actual low-income consumers.

On the other hand, segments of the white working class—fans of the comedian Jeff Foxworthy’s self-mocking “You might be a redneck if . . .” brand of humor—took tongue-in-cheek pride in the iconography of trailer parks, beer bellies, and kissing cousins meant to stereotype *them*.³ Here the dream was a different kind of resistance: armed with “shit on a shingle” (canned corn beef on white bread) and Confederate flags, white trash parties threw what Foxworthy called “a glorious lack of sophistication” in the face of an imagined enemy of uptight liberal elites.⁴ In this vein, white trash parties, for all their carnivalesque hilarity, were deadly serious. They appropriated a demeaning insult, turning it into a celebration of “authentic” white Americans fighting for their rightful place in a culture supposedly poisoned by liberal multiculturalism.

Industrial bread played a key role in both versions of white trash fun. It was both a ubiquitous menu item and a visual stand-in for a whole range of assumptions about low-class consumption. Industrial white bread called up a lack of pretension—unfussy and authentically American—but also irresponsibility and shame. To eat white bread at a white trash party was to proclaim, “I never *really* eat white bread.” And of course, as should be clear by now, none of that symbolism would have been possible, even imaginable, for most of the twentieth century.

To make the Wonder bread-laden gags of white trash chic legible, America’s “best invention” had to become an icon of poor choices and narrow lives. This historic upending was a relatively recent phenomenon. It played out between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, in the cultural trajectory from hippie to yuppie. During that remarkable twenty-year period, “white bread” became an adjective as well

as a noun—an adjective with two related but different meanings that still compete with each other today. In the early years of the 1960s counterculture, “white bread” came to signify all that was bland, homogeneous, and suburban. White bread was establishment, plastic, and corporate—everything the counterculture in all its manifestations hoped to destroy. This meaning remains: you know that music described as “white bread” will be funkless pablum. A TV show set “in a white bread cul-de-sac” will deal with life in cookie-cutter tract mansions.

By the early 1980s, however, another usage had emerged. In this case, “white bread” signified almost the opposite: not bland, affluent suburbia, but white trash. In movies and fiction white bread, like broken-down trailers, came to denote poverty of a white and rural kind—the world described by residents of TV’s *South Park* as “a quiet, little, white-bread, podunk, white-trash, redneck corner of the U.S.A.” The writer James Salter evoked the despair and grim prospects of this kind of white bread life in his story “Dirt.” The story turns around a waitress who is young and beautiful now, but beginning to feel the walls of inescapable poverty closing in around her. As Salter sums up her sparse future, “She would be living in the trailer park. . . . Her kids would eat white bread in big soft packages.”⁵

This association between white bread and white trash endures, even as African Americans and Latinos make up an ever-larger portion of the market for Wonder bread and pan Bimbo. So how did white bread become white trash? In very much the same way white trash parties work—through a complex play of cultural subversions, rebellious aesthetics, rituals of social status, and protests against mass consumption. The outcomes of this process have been just as ambiguous as any white trash party: in 2009, for the first time in U.S. history, whole wheat bread sales topped white—presumably a healthy development. And yet the same anti-elitist attacks on industrial eating that set that change into motion during the late 1960s had by the 1980s generated new alimentary elites, new forms of social distinction. Dreams of good bread as an antidote to an oppressive and unhealthy social structure became the stuff of ultra-high-end consumption.⁶

FIGHT THE WHITE

In 1954, the legendary industrial designer Raymond Loewy, commissioned to study bread packaging, observed that there was pretty much only one color combination that moved loaves off shelves—red, white, and blue, and maybe golden yellow. Ten years later, a young Catholic nun named Sister Corita with a fast-growing reputation for making edgy pop art, hijacked the classic red, white, blue, and yellow Wonder bread package design for decidedly different purposes. In a series of prints drawing inspiration from the Wonder bread label, Sister Corita proclaimed that radical Christian commensality and social justice could be snatched even from the heart of mass-consumer society. In one of Sister Corita's Wonder bread prints, text from the French existentialist Albert Camus followed the iconic words "Enriched Bread Wonder" like an ingredient list: "Great ideas," it read, "come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations, a first flutter of wings, the gentle stirrings of life and hope. Helps Build a Body Twelve Ways."⁷

In the years that followed, the country saw much uproar of empires and nations—race riots, mechanized slaughter in Vietnam, assassinations, and toxic spills—but also the birth of new social movements, civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, farm workers' rights: the gentle, and not so gentle, stirrings of life and hope. Amidst all that roar and counter-roar, however, it was increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to associate industrial bread with anything living or hopeful—even as a subversive jest. Store-bought white bread combined the two most hated motifs of the era: industrial origins and whiteness. As food historian Warren Belasco wrote, "For Theodore Roszak, who popularized the word 'counterculture' in his 1969 best-seller, white bread was a perfect metaphor for the regime of experts and technocrats who, for the sake of efficiency and order, threatened to rob us of all effort, thought, and independence." "Only in *Amerika* could people want their food bleached . . . all bleached to match the bleached-out mentality of white supremacy," another counterculture writer proclaimed.⁸ Good food was rustic, unrefined, and brown, ideally with roots in peasant society. "Don't eat white; eat right," the saying went, and Dr. Clark's 1920s-era ditty, "The whiter your bread, the quicker you're dead," experienced a dramatic revival.

The counterculture—itsself a diverse collection of movements, philosophies, impulses, and ideals—strained against the homogeneous, the artificial, and the mechanical in myriad ways. Factions and subgroups often spent more time denouncing each other's shortcomings than they did fighting the Man, but they could all agree about one thing: white bread. It was, for the counterculture, an instructive commodity—a familiar, accessible way to comprehend any of the binaries that gave shape to the movement and animated revolt: authentic vs. artificial, natural vs. chemical, brown vs. white, healthy vs. poisonous, real vs. plastic, peaceful vs. militaristic. As a 1973 essay in the Minnesota counterculture magazine *North Country Alternatives* explained, "Bread is a good focal point because its story, from grain grown on giant factory farms to technologically-produced Wonder Bread, is a very clear illustration of where power lies, and how it is used against us."⁹ The sterile, chemically laced, and homogeneous substance of white bread could stand in as a synecdoche for social conformism, the environmental costs of industrialism, racism, bland suburbia, or cultural imperialism abroad. Establishment archenemies such as Robert McNamara or Earl Butz weren't *like* white bread, they *were* white bread.¹⁰

This political allegory had deep roots in American culture, and 1960s counterculture drew heavily on earlier food reform movements. Rumblings of the countercultural revolt against white bread could even be felt during the 1950s golden age of industrial eating. Most consumers happily ate six slices of industrial white bread a day during the 1950s, but sporadic and short-lived waves of anxiety were not uncommon. During those outbursts, fanned by popular radio health advisors like Carleton Fredricks, the FDA or USDA received thousands of letters decrying "unnatural" chemical additives in bread.¹¹ Congress responded through the 1950s with hearings on the makeup of industrial bread and the safety of chemical emulsifiers, dough conditioners, softeners, and other additives. In 1951, for example, Congress gathered seventeen thousand pages of testimony on the bread question and headlines across the country asked, "Are We Eating Poisoned Bread?"¹²

Nevertheless, 1950s-era concerns about bread were different from those that would emerge later. In the 1950s, consumers and officials expressed their dismay at the state of bread in a language of public

health, corrupt baking trusts, and adulteration that would have been immediately familiar to any food reformer of the Progressive Era. "Change the national food habits and we can still [have] a virile nation," read one typical letter to the FDA about bread. It could have come straight out of the century's first decades.¹³ In the 1960s and 1970s counterculture, food reformers clearly drew on these Progressive Era roots, but they also created a new language for talking about the problems of diet. Rejecting the dream of public health expertise and government regulation in the service of national virility, the counterculture imagined individual eating itself as a form of activism.

Food choices had already begun to factor into civil rights and early antiwar activism. Lunch counter sit-ins, political fasts, and the UFW grape boycott all linked sustenance and social change. The act of eating (or not eating) could draw attention to demands for rights and recognition. But none of those late-1950s and early-1960s movements believed that social change could be achieved solely by eating the right food. Bread's role in these movements was indicative: to the extent that it factored into their struggles, bread served generically as a symbol of Christian commensality posed against worldly injustice, as in the *Wonder Bread* seriographs of Sister Corita, Daniel Berrigan's antiwar poetry (*And the Risen Bread*), or Thomas Merton's socially engaged spiritual teachings (*Bread in the Wilderness* and *The Living Bread*). For these purposes, any bread would do, and social movements saw little reason to focus their attentions specifically on the evils of processed food. When Martin Luther King Jr. called for a boycott of Wonder bread in Memphis, for example, it was unfair hiring practices, not chemical additives, that concerned him.¹⁴

With the emergence of the "hippie" counterculture, however, food wasn't just a tactic in the theater of social change. Changing diets had become an arena of politics in its own right—perhaps *the* arena. As Crescent Dragonwagon, author of the popular *Commune Cookbook*, declared, the ecology of human diet united all struggles against oppression, from black and women's liberation to antiwar movements. Again, bread was indicative. As influential whole foods guru Beatrice Trum Hunter proclaimed, bread baking constituted "a revolt against plastic food in a plastic culture. The free-form loaf is but another aspect of the revolt against the mechanization of life."¹⁵

Mostly middle-class, white, and buoyed by an upbeat economy, flower children and whole foods advocates exuded an optimistic sense that changing one's lifestyle could change the world. Utopian dreams of leisure, freedom from oppressive experts, the pursuit of pleasure, and self-actualization flourished. Although segments of the counterculture would harden considerably after the upheavals of 1968 and into the grim recessions of the 1970s, much of it was as joyous and raucous as earlier generations of civil rights activists had been earnest and disciplined.¹⁶

Counterculture cooks threw off the heavy hand of home economics, dispensing with recipes and reveling in chance, experimentation, and imperfection. Counterculture cookbooks—often self-published—mocked their own authority, encouraging readers to distrust instructions found in cookbooks. Precise directions and exact measurements were oppressive vestiges of an inhuman system. Readers should "learn to feel for themselves through experience and experimentation," as *Tassajara Bread Book* author Edward Espe Brown urged. Instructions in *Mother Earth News* for baking bread captured this new outlook perfectly, directing would-be bakers to knead until the dough "springs like a plump baby's bottom," and then enjoining them to "take this opportunity to grease the cans and light a joint."¹⁷

During the first half of the twentieth century, experts from home economics and the baking industry had so thoroughly convinced Americans that only lab-coated professionals could succeed at the cryptic science of bread baking that counterculture food gurus took distinct pride in liberating it for the untrained masses. "Anyone can do this" and "Baking is easy" were constant refrains in counterculture cookbooks. Buddhist monk Edward Espe Brown, whose *Tassajara Bread Book* taught a generation to bake, went even further: the precise outcome of bread making didn't matter. Instead, he counseled readers to understand baking as a deeply sensual spiritual practice, independent of attachment to perfect final products.¹⁸

The freeform revolt against culinary expertise could seem frivolous and self-involved at times. Mo Willet's *Vegetarian Gothic*, for example, offered this dietary advice: "You should eat when you're hungry, feast when you're joyful, fast to get high, and sing of love all

the time." "Fill your bread with wholesome foods and lots of love and you'll find yourself feeling good all over," Willet glowed.¹⁹ But there was method in the revelry. Just as industrial white bread stood for larger systems of oppression, upending decades of dietary expertise challenged all forms of authoritarian control. For Crescent Dragonwagon, encouraging imperfect cooking undermined "antinatural" uniformity in other realms, from the beauty myths of femininity to the lockstep war machine. Women, she argued, experienced cooking as an oppressive burden because generations of food experts had turned it into an overcontrolled, rationalized, and deadening imposition. Thus, treating cooking as a "creative, expressive art" undermined larger systems of gendered oppression.²⁰

Similarly, her short stint as professional baker taught her the larger lesson that "*capitalism can't work*." After struggling to produce affordable bread without sacrificing ingredient quality or wholesome process, she concluded, "It's impossible to make good, healthy bread at any kind of profit. Her reasoning was insightful, quite possibly true, and certainly revealing of the larger dream of "good bread" animating the counterculture. It's worth quoting at length.

If you got [your ingredients] in bulk enough to make it sizably cheaper, you'd be doing so much business, probably, that you would be shipping the breads all over the place—and then you'd have to add preservatives or have stale bread! I really believe the answer lies in small communities. But—and this is what brought all this to mind—it's interesting that good bread, the symbol of the American dream (or rather, one of many symbols) cannot be produced within it now. I don't consider myself, really, in it. I don't mean that as arrogantly as it sounds—I just mean that I and the people I live with are surely not typical of Americans, and the bread we bake we don't "produce." Some people and their narrow definition of politics! Baking a loaf of brown bread in this society is revolutionary, if you know why you're doing it. It is for us.²¹

Invocations of bread politics like this were standard fare in the counterculture, but Dragonwagon's take was both intelligent and influ-

ential. The statement begins with a concise gloss on the pressures of capitalist baking—the constraints of efficiency and scale in a competitive, profit-driven context. Then, like so many critics in the American agrarian tradition, she offers small communities as an antidote. The statement never clarifies exactly how small communities baking their own bread might sidestep the capitalist system—historically they rarely have, even on the remote frontier—but it was a powerful vision. And it attached a feeling of profound agency to the simple act of baking one's own bread. To bake was to stand apart from the system. With this elegant argument, Crescent Dragonwagon repositioned cooking as an act of resistance, turning domestic binds into the stuff of liberation.

And yet, for all its radical anti-capitalist trappings, this dream of good bread also aligned Dragonwagon and the counterculture in general with a deeply conservative lineage. The countercultural dream of good bread challenged authority and expertise, stood against capitalist agribusiness, and sought to remake relations among people and between nature and society. Yet it also rested on rather orthodox myths of American individualism and independence. "Homemade bread," Dragonwagon observed wryly, "is a symbolic thing. It's American—it goes with pioneers and beginnings and family."²²

In this evocation of frontier independence and its foodways as the bedrock of good society, the counterculture drew heavily on Grahamism. Perhaps more surprisingly, given the counterculture's disdain for regimen, the dream of good bread also gave new life to the ideologies of Physical Culture: sickness, both individual and social, was, in large part, traced back to weak, duped individuals' descent into an unnatural diet. Sickness might not have been a sin, but it did arise from individual irresponsibility. To be sure, this was a more politically conscious vision than MacFadden's. Dragonwagon and her comrades believed that individual irresponsibility could only be understood in the context of a poisonous, corrupt System in need of radical change. But, like MacFadden, they didn't reflect much on what values and assumptions got smuggled in with their utopia of self-defense through good food. At the very least, they failed to recognize how easily their vision of good bread and good society could be recast in accordance with entirely capitalist and individualistic values.

DOMESTICATING THE COUNTERCULTURE

On October 23, 1969, the United States celebrated its first National Day of Bread, sponsored by the country's millers, bakers, and grocers and enshrined by congressional resolution.²³ Most Americans missed it, though. There were a few other things going on in the country. The National Day of Bread fell in the midst of Chicago's Days of Rage and only a week after hundreds of thousands of Americans mobilized across the country in the first National Moratorium Day of antiwar protests. It came after a long summer that saw the Stonewall uprising, Manson murders, Woodstock, stepped-up nuclear testing by the Soviet Union, and the beginning of U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam. Two extraordinary events—the moon landing and the '69 Mets' underdog World Series victory—brought the country together a bit that summer. But mostly it felt like things were coming apart at the seams. In other words, for anyone threatened by social turmoil and political upheaval, it was a good time for a National Day of Bread. Celebrating bread allowed besieged conservatives to talk about family, Christianity, and old-fashioned values. What little press coverage the National Day of Bread received unanimously featured churches and happy families—quite different from the images of upheaval and bloodshed shown on nightly TV.

During the summer and fall of 1969, arguments about Vietnam, long hair, and tofu might have turned many kitchen tables into war zones. But not bread. At a time when Abby Hoffman purportedly urged kids to kill their parents, homemade, whole wheat, and multi-grain breads were an easy piece of the counterculture for outsiders to swallow. A few social conservatives and hardliners within the baking industry rallied against dark loaves peddled by "food faddists," "scaremongers," and "anti-Americans," but mostly people embraced countercultural bread. In a stirring 1968 editorial, even E. J. Pyler, the elder statesman of baking science and publisher of the industry's leading trade magazine, urged his fellow bakers to "fight conformity."²⁴

By the late 1970s, whole wheat bread consumption had soared, industrial white bread sales had plummeted, and the country was experiencing an unprecedented revival of home baking. For the first time in decades, overall bread consumption inched upwards, and "health breads" with roots in the counterculture led the way.²⁵ Three factors accounted for this epochal shift. First, as already suggested, counter-

cultural critiques of industrial baking drew on a social dreamworld of conservative nostalgia that was easy to appreciate on Main Street and in suburbia. Second, stripped of its emphasis on community and social transformation, the counterculture's love of natural whole grains translated fluidly into the consumer-driven health food and self-actualization trends of the 1970s. Finally, high-value whole grain health breads offered a desperately needed source of profit and enhanced public image for industrial bakers crippled by declining sales and food safety scandals. Let's look at each of these factors more closely.

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In 1970 Richard Pryor stormed off stage in the middle of his popular nightclub act at Las Vegas's Aladdin Theater, refusing to do another minute of "white bread humor." This was a pivotal moment in the comedian's career. He fled to Berkeley, California, where he immersed himself in drugs and the teachings of Malcolm X, only to emerge a few years later as a bigger, much edgier star.²⁶ It was also the first widely cited use of "white bread" as an adjective. The phrase spoke to soaring racial tensions and a mounting sense of despair over white Americans' unwillingness to compromise even a little on their investment in the political, cultural, and economic institutions of white privilege. Strangely though, "white bread" America seemed quite ready to adopt brown bread as a symbol of its values.

Brown breads of various sorts—mostly highly sweetened whole wheat loaves—were rare in the postwar United States, but they were not unknown. Rather, they were fixtures of particular times and places: church bake sales, family gatherings, and quaint country inns. Although many still doubted whole wheat breads' digestibility and questioned whether they were appropriate for daily consumption, in limited venues they were treasured delicacies. Father and the kids might have grumbled about brown bread's "sawdust" texture, but the loaves were also esteemed as symbols of old-fashioned feminine care and rural fortitude. So, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when barefoot girls in peasant skirts made home baking cool, hippie brown bread would have seemed less of a threat to "American" tastes and values than other counterculture staples.

The decidedly uncountercultural global milling and food-processing conglomerate International Multifoods captured this affinity perfectly in a 1970 pamphlet, *Naturally Good Baking*. The recipe book could be read simultaneously as an attempt to appropriate counterculture chic and as a rebuke of youth rebellion. Illustrated with drawings of pioneer life, the booklet addressed itself to modern homemakers who had recently come to appreciate the value of whole wheat breads and desserts, but who long ago lost "Grandma's cookbook." According to International Multifoods, recapturing the aroma of fresh-baked bread could return families to the days when Grandma "cared about what her family ate and spent hours in the kitchen" to provide it.²⁷ With a few deft words and drawings, the recipe book repositioned the origins of 1970s interest in whole grain goodness—away from unwashed, rebellious youth and into the sanitized territory of "how things used to be."

Counterculture food gurus and activists had different takes on this kind of nostalgia. Some groups actively resisted it. Worker-owned co-operatives like Seattle's Little Bread Company and Chicago's Bread Shop, for example, dwelled less on the past and more on community organizing, job creation, and providing good low-cost bread. Even the moral superiority of whole wheat bread was not always a given. Particularly in more socialist-leaning bakeries, for example, members argued over whether to value white bread, with its low-cost, working-class appeal, alongside brown.²⁸

Other counterculture figures approached sentimentality in a more conflicted manner. For Crescent Dragonwagon, homemade food cemented the foundations of an alternative social structure. And yet, at times, Dragonwagon seemed aware that her alternative might not be so alternative: *The Commune Cookbook* expressed an extraordinary faith in the ability of its idea of "good food" to appeal to people across differences of class and race, but it also acknowledged the way visions of good food could divide groups. On paper, Dragonwagon's dream of a new way of relating to food resonates with her desire for women's rights. In practice, though, she realized that renewed emphasis on women's place in the kitchen smacked of old-fashioned patriarchy and ran the risk of creating yet another burden women must bear.

Carol Flinders, coauthor of the popular *Laurel's Kitchen*, for her part, understood this tension but didn't appear worried. For Flinders, kitchens were women's "most effective front for social change." "I'm not saying that women shouldn't take jobs," she claimed in the introduction to *Laurel's Kitchen*, just that the place "where [women's] efforts will count the most is not in business or professions . . . but in the home and community."²⁹ These were "the most effective front[s] for social change." But the fact that Flinders didn't apply the same logic to men was telling: for Flinders, women, not men, made social change from the kitchen outward because women were naturally and innately positioned to make the world whole through caring labor.³⁰ In *Laurel's Kitchen* bread making exemplified a feminine ethic of care, and learning to make bread served as a, if not *the*, crucial rite of passage into that ideal. Reconnecting with women's innate goodness and transformative potential required reconnecting with the innate goodness of whole grain, something that had been lost when machines began making bread.

At the same time, Flinders clearly saw how closely her feminine ideal allied her with generations of constrictive patriarchal tradition. Her solution to this conundrum was to imagine a bygone era of empowered domesticity that could be revived in the modern world. *Laurel's Kitchen* unfolds around the character of Flinders's coauthor Laurel Robertson, a friend with "natural wisdom" who dedicated herself single-mindedly to caring for her hearth and family. Robertson epitomized Flinders's feminine ideal. She was a woman who didn't betray her innate value as a mother or true place in the political life of her community by seeking a place in men's unnatural, externally focused world.

It would have been hard to read *Laurel's Kitchen* as anything but conservative, written as it was in the era of Gloria Steinem, Equal Rights Amendment battles, expanding definitions of family, and the first sparks of the gay rights movement. And yet Flinders's picture of the content, hearth-centered life available to women was so beautifully drawn, so sensual and full of love, that it couldn't help but appeal, even to many feminists.

Thirty years later, the same tension still haunts the alternative food movement. In 2010, *New York Times* columnist Peggy Oren-

stein identified the newest incarnation of this recurring conundrum as “the femivore’s dilemma.” Femivores, she observed, were “highly educated women who left the workforce to care for kith and kin,” and then carved out a space of meaning and agency in the home by devoting themselves to politically conscious food provision. In this way, femivores redefined “traditional” domestic labor—cooking from scratch, canning, gardening, raising chickens, and even shopping—as an arena of “self-sufficiency, autonomy and personal fulfillment”—the very principles that, according to Orenstein, had led women to the workforce in the first place.³¹

Orenstein’s article sparked a predictable debate. Many critics focused on a contradiction that even Orenstein acknowledged: the “tomato-canning feminists’” realm of self-sufficiency and autonomy assumed an income-earning spouse somewhere just outside the picture frame. How could “autonomy” be premised on financial dependence? As Orenstein wrote, “If a woman is not careful, it seems, chicken wire can coop her up as surely as any gilded cage.”³² Other critics dug into the more hidden assumptions of Orenstein’s piece: while feminists might disagree on whether femivore life was a cage or not, it was most definitely gilded. To suffer the femivore’s dilemma one must be relatively affluent. Like “the omnivore’s dilemma,” the femivore’s dilemma emerges out of the highly privileged position of having almost limitless life options, something that most women—and men—in contemporary America don’t experience.

This brings us back to *Laurel’s Kitchen*. For, while critics in the 1970s and today have noted the gendered contradictions of nostalgia for the lost days of Grandma’s cooking, less has been said about the vision of America smuggled in with the aroma of fresh bread. When counterculture food gurus like Flinders imagined the American past, they saw a halcyon world of independent cabins filled with nuclear families. Grandma didn’t slave in cotton fields or garment factories, nor did she struggle to save the farm from creditors. She didn’t campaign for suffrage or march for workers’ rights on May Day. Home was not a migrant farmhand’s wagon. Great Depressions only increased the “realness” of American food. And when immigrants or people of color appeared in this America, they were scrubbed of actual history, eagerly waiting to share exotic new ingredients or a bit

of ancient wisdom with their white audience. This was a romanticized past.

In the enchanted broccoli forest of best-selling counterculture cookbooks, however, at least one author offered a glimmer of perspective. Mollie Katzen, perhaps the most influential cookbook author of the era, honestly admitted, “It is difficult to talk about bread-baking without lapsing into sentimentality.” “One is tempted to go on and on about how exhilarated and connected to the universe one feels, about how the kitchen atmosphere acquires sublime soulfulness, about how born-again breadmakers are magical, charismatic individuals,” she confessed. “[But] it is not my place to promise you a transformed existence. What I offer is one with more bread recipes. The rest is what you make of it.”³³

By the late 1970s, however, it was clear that Americans were hooked on self-transformation. Even more than through their appeal to conservative nostalgia, counterculture bread tastes spread to mainstream America via the quest for perfect health.³⁴ Healthy eating had, of course, been one important component of the counterculture since the mid-1960s, but by the mid-1970s it had been elevated to a supreme position in American life. Stripped of its political and social critiques, the counterculture’s fixation on wellness easily morphed into an individual-centered, consumer-driven bodily project. Health food stores, yoga studios, and exercise fads flourished across the country, permanently changing the way Americans thought about wellness. Bernarr MacFadden would have been proud: the counterculture’s search for bodily harmony had found its love match in 1970s self-actualization.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, counterculture food rebels believed that if Americans only knew about the dangers of industrial food and the goodness of healthy eating, they would change their diet. Changing the country’s relation to food would, in turn, bring about swift changes in economic and political relations. By the late 1970s, counterculture food gurus saw part of their dream fulfilled: more Americans knew about the dangers of industrial eating and aspired to counterculture visions of healthy eating than at any other point in the past century. By the early 1980s, a study revealed that six out of ten young singles thought that white bread was unhealthy and

to be avoided.³⁵ But it was also becoming clear that this consciousness wouldn't necessarily set in motion the larger structural changes counterculture food activists had hoped for. In fact, the industrial food system could almost effortlessly assimilate health consciousness. The fixation on wellness emerging across large swathes of the U.S. population in the late 1970s could serve as a much-needed new engine for profit in the industrial food system.

This was clearly the case in the baking industry. The perceived moral and bodily goodness of whole wheat bread had helped lead the country toward health food, and the baking industry was ready to share in the bounty. In fact, the 1970s health craze couldn't have come at a better time for the industry. Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, industrial bakers labored under low profits and a tattered image. After the great chemistry- and engineering-driven advances of the 1950s and early 1960s, even industry insiders conceded that their business had fallen into a state of torpor. Market studies revealed that bread itself had become so homogeneous that consumers had trouble distinguishing one brand from another. What little profits could be squeezed out of cheap white bread came mostly from mergers and oligopoly power, rather than innovation. A handful of companies—many the descendants of William Ward's Bread Trust—jockeyed for market position using brute force instead of quality product. Constant investigations into price fixing by dominant firms marked the period, as market concentration increased.³⁶ When wheat prices, and by extension bread prices, soared in the mid-1970s as a result of high oil prices and large sales of surplus grain to the USSR, it only heightened consumers' sense that bakers were taking advantage of them.

Meanwhile, the public embrace of health foods and environmentalism exposed industrial baking practices to more condemnation. And the locus of this opprobrium had shifted from counterculture to mainstream, from Haight-Ashbury to Capitol Hill. In 1971, Ralph Nader launched a new round of Senate hearings on the baking industry and spurred the Federal Trade Commission to take action against misleading health claims in Wonder bread advertising.³⁷

Accounts of early twentieth-century experiments feeding rats a white bread-only diet resurfaced, migrating from their traditional place on the mimeographed pages of alternative weeklies to the

science sections of major newspapers.³⁸ Even mainstream nutrition scientists, long reluctant to question the place of white bread in a balanced diet, joined in. As Hilda Swenerton, California state nutrition expert for the university extension service, admitted in the *Los Angeles Times*, "We've been so busy pointing out how the faddists are all wrong that we've failed to recognize some of the good faddists have done."³⁹

In 1977 the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, backed by a stable of mainstream scientists, issued its landmark *Dietary Goals for the United States*. The report put a government seal on a set of recommendations not all that different from those found in Frances Moore Lappé's radical 1971 *Diet for a Small Planet*: Americans should dramatically increase consumption of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, while cutting back on meat, dairy, and refined sugars.⁴⁰ Even more importantly, mainstream nutrition science had discovered the paramount importance of fiber. Starting in 1975, scores of books, magazine articles, and news items touted the lifesaving benefits of roughage, ushering in "the fiber era" in American nutrition.⁴¹

While some in the baking industry fought back against this dietary heresy, most treated it as an opportunity. Two companies had already shown that health bread could be mass-produced with industrial methods at a high profit. Both begun out of Connecticut homes decades earlier, Pepperidge Farms and Arnold Bakers exemplified the way industrial producers could appeal to a health-obsessed nation without sacrificing scale and efficiency. By the late 1960s, Margaret Rudkin, founder of Pepperidge Farms, had built the company into a multimillion-dollar industry leader, but its origin was classic American health foodism.⁴² In the 1930s, asthma crippled Rudkin's youngest son and doctors could offer little assistance. Convinced that diet played a role in the boy's affliction, Rudkin set out to cure him with a diet of whole wheat bread, baked from her Irish grandmother's recipe. It worked well enough to attract interest in the community. The boy's doctor requested loaves for his other patients and demand grew from there. Soon Rudkin had, with the help of two servants, started a small bakery in the family's home kitchen.

The wife of a wealthy financier, Rudkin raised money to open one

real bread factory, and then others. By the late 1950s, Pepperidge Farms baked more than a million loaves a week in its cutting-edge bakeries. Despite its dependence on high-tech production, however, the company's advertising was self-consciously old-fashioned—even by baking industry standards. The combination was unbeatable. With its cutting-edge technology and homey image, the company soon dominated national markets for health bread, even though its loaves sold for more than double the price of regular bread. In 1961 the Campbell's Soup Company bought Pepperidge Farms, and Rudkin died in 1967, but the company kept pace with the country's emerging interest in counterculture food.

So did Arnold Bakers, a second multimillion-dollar company built on dark, dense loaves.⁴³ Paul Dean Arnold had founded that company in 1940 out of his garage after quitting work at a Nabisco plant. Touting products like "Bran-Nola Bread," the company had grown to more than \$200 million in annual sales by the time of Arnold's death in 1985. The Arnold "Health Loaf Natural," a highly sweetened light brown mixture of stone ground whole wheat and unbleached white flour, was, in many ways, the iconic health bread of its time.

Through the 1970s, ingredients that seemed drawn straight from a commune kitchen—sprouted wheat, unsulfured molasses, raisin juice, and wheat germ—gave Pepperidge Farms and Arnold loaves exotic appeal. They were Woodstock in cellophane. Other companies quickly followed suit, and soon health breads were the fastest-growing segment of the entire baking industry. Between 1967 and 1982, white bread consumption plummeted 30 percent—but overall bread consumption, led by high-fiber brown loaves, actually increased.⁴⁴

The advent of industrial health bread was not without hiccups. Few of the country's major bread conglomerates shared Rudkin's and Arnold's attachment to the spirit of health food doctrines. Theirs was a purely instrumental embrace. If loaves could be made to *look* like brown health loaves by adding caramel color, it was fine. And why not rack up impressive amounts of fiber at a low cost by adding cheap wood pulp to industrial loaves? Wonder bread's parent company, ITT Continental, advertised that its Fresh Horizons loaf, filled with "powdered cellulous" (aka wood pulp), had 400 percent more fiber than

white bread, but "the same great taste." Consumers didn't buy it. Fresh Horizons and other wood pulp fiber breads earned a spot on the *New York Times*'s list of the worst foods of 1976—just under Tube-A-Goo, syringes filled with brightly colored syrup that looked and smelled "exactly like hair waving lotion."⁴⁵

In the end, consumer outrage and concerted action by government regulators reined in the early excesses of industrial health bread. Unfortunately, that didn't stop many of the new mass-market health breads from tasting a bit like Tube-A-Goo. In order to achieve extended shelf life without the use of chemical preservatives, bakers jammed health loaves full of moisture-retaining natural sweeteners. The result, as *New York Times* food writer Mimi Sheraton noted, was sometimes less than pleasant: "cloying sweetness" and "a limp, wet texture."⁴⁶

Still, the baking industry pressed on. By the late 1970s, health breads weren't just a lucrative niche market—they were the essential element of the industry's battle against resurgent home baking.

REVOLT IN THE KITCHEN AND THE RISE OF YUPPIE BREAD

Thanks to the counterculture, conservative nostalgia, and spreading concern about wellness, home baking was more popular than at any time in the previous century. Guided by *Laurel's Kitchen*, *The Tasajara Bread Book*, and James Beard's *Beard on Bread*, millions of Americans were experimenting with their own doughs for the first time. And these were definitely experiments. Uncertain how to parse competing ideas about which new grain was the purest and most salubrious, 1970s home bakers crammed every grain they could get into their bread. The age of the whole-wheat-spelt-oat-amaranth-brown rice-millet-buckwheat-barley loaf was born. For good measure, 1970s bakers also threw in zucchini, olives, carrots, bananas, sunflower seeds, soya, whey, carob, and dates. Meanwhile, large doses of honey and molasses eased the unfamiliar taste and texture of whole grains onto the American palate.

Between 1973 and 1979, nearly every major newspaper, home magazine, and cooking monthly ran stories noting the boom in home baking and offering tips to first timers. John Hess, writing in the *New York Times*, called it a "kitchen revolt."⁴⁷ Bread making was in

vogue. In fact, it was in *Vogue*: the style magazine's April 1979 issue touted homemade bread as an easy way its readers could ensure less sugar and more fulfillment in their lives.⁴⁸ That home bread making had made it from the food section to the fashion pages said something to the baking industry. It seemed as if the country's bakers had to fight a small version of the early twentieth-century battle against home baking all over again.

In the 1900s bakers undercut home baking with fears of impurity and contagion, buttressed by a charismatic sheen of scientific authority. By the 1970s, however, counterculture gurus had effectively associated charismatic food science with hubris and destruction. A new strategy was needed. So, in the 1980s, the baking industry took back terrain from home baking with niche marketing and appeals to upscale chic.

This approach reflected larger shifts in the U.S. economy. Rocked by recessions, oil crises, and de-industrialization, the U.S. economy began to take on a new form in the 1970s. Manufacturing no longer served as the country's driving engine. Financial services—making money from money—had begun to take their place at the center of the economy.

After steadily rising through the postwar period, real wages for most Americans began to decline. Even forty years later, average wages adjusted for cost of living still wouldn't have returned to their pre-1970s level, but the financialization of the U.S. economy did produce enormous wealth for urban professionals. Wealth distribution in the country became, and remained, more polarized than at any other period since the Roaring Twenties. Affluent singles and childless couples reveled in unprecedented disposable incomes, giving rise to a world of "yuppie" consumption. And yet, across the country, households that could afford to maintain Carol Flinders's dream of a dedicated homemaker were growing increasingly rare.⁴⁹

These trends would have a marked effect on the very nature of consumption. During the postwar era of rising wages and decreasing inequality, consumption largely took the form of standardized, one-size-fits-all, mass-market commodities. As with enriched white breads on supermarket shelves, differences among competing commodities were relatively small. During the 1980s, however, fueled by

the rapid segmentation of American society, consumer life diversified into ever-more precise niche markets. Massive department stores lost ground to boutique chains catering to narrow bands of consumers, who increasingly began to tie their identities to specific niche markets.⁵⁰

Along with advances in transportation and packaging, this had a profound effect on the American diet. No longer would everyone eat the same iceberg lettuce. Increasingly, shoppers could choose the style of lettuce—shipped in from Mexico, if needed—that fit their status aspirations exactly. To survive, bakers would have to embrace real product diversification. And in this area, upstarts outpaced industry leaders. Small bakeries sprouted up across the country in record numbers during the 1980s. By the 1990s, some of them had grown into chains, "vying to become the 'Starbucks' of bread."⁵¹ Au Bon Pain, La Vie de France, Great Harvest, the St. Louis Bread Company, and Breadsmith clones spread through suburban malls and city streets.

Many of the resurgent small bakeries paid the rent with sweets and sandwiches, not bread. Nevertheless, by the early 1990s, observers could point to a "new bread mystique" seducing the country. Like the new consumer economy in general, the small-bakery revival of the 1980s and 1990s targeted specific class and status groups. Supermarkets still sold industrial white bread, of course, but demand for fluffy loaves increasingly concentrated in lower-income brackets. By the end of the 1970s, people buying supermarket white bread almost universally ranked low price as their top consideration in food purchasing. Middle- and upper-class consumers were increasingly willing to pay more for distinctive bread. Now "we can sell Cadillacs along with the Fords," a *Bakery Magazine* writer beamed.⁵²

Catering to middle- and upper-class consumers interested in health and charmed by novelty, supermarket chains opened in-store bakeries that made high-value specialty breads from scratch or "baked off" partially cooked loaves from central distribution centers. Comfortable suburbanites switched to health breads like Arnold and Oro-wheat and flocked to strip-mall chain bakeries.

Meanwhile, urban elites could select from a growing array of high-end bread bakeries—often with roots in the counterculture. In 1977, Mimi Sheraton had eulogized urban ethnic bakeries, lost to

gentrification and suburbanization. According to Sheraton, San Francisco sourdough had become “practically extinct.”⁵³ Within a decade, however, the situation had changed dramatically. On the West Coast, young urban professionals—yuppies—discovered the pleasures of European-style artisan loaves at Nancy Silverton’s La Brea Bakery or Steve Sullivan’s Acme Bread. In New York, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the opening of soon-to-be-institutions like Amy’s Bakery, Tom Cat Bakery, and the Sullivan Street Bakery.

Multiple forces drove this explosion of high-end bread bakeries: choosing healthy grain foods had become closely associated with ideas of personal responsibility and successful self-image; yuppie consumers craved distinctive gourmet foods, especially ones with ties to Europe or California; and, perhaps most importantly, high-quality bread appealed to a new consumer dream. Market researchers called it “neo-traditionalism,” and it combined nostalgia for 1950s-vintage family values with a cash-charged belief in the possibility of achieving self-actualization through consumer choice. Artisanal bread offered a perfect neo-traditionalist symbol, self-consciously old-fashioned and yet decidedly upscale.⁵⁴

European-style breads as gourmet status symbols were not new, at least in New York. As early as 1962, the year Eero Saarinen’s bird-like TWA terminal swooped down at what was still called Idlewild International Airport, a subsidiary of Pepperidge Farms was airlifting Parisian baguettes into Manhattan. By 1963, affluent New Yorkers could buy the “astronomically priced” 85-cent bread at 250 outlets, including Bloomingdales. Baked overnight in a prestigious Paris *boulangerie* and on New York shelves by noon, the loaves’ thirty-six hundred “food miles” were something to brag about.⁵⁵

By the 1980s European bread was spreading west into the country’s heartland. Meanwhile, the isolation of *Lactobacillus sanfrancisco*—the bacteria responsible for San Francisco sourdough’s tang—set off a craze for sourdough that marched east across the country.

High-status bread inspired legions of imitators, some crude and some creative. On the crude side, bakeries interested in scale and efficiency could substitute “natural sourdough flavor” for costly slow, cool fermentation. Often, as one bakery scientist acknowledged, the all-important *look* of artisan authenticity could be achieved with-

out sacrificing industrial efficiency. “We developed our technology to produce perfectly regular looking loaves. It’s not that hard to program them to make perfectly irregular ones,” he confessed.⁵⁶ Like rustic faux-Italian tiles and factory-scratched “vintage” furniture, which give a patina of history and character to fifteen-minute-old McMansions, artfully mutilated bread promised a mini respite from the soulless world of modern commodity production—even though it was still fast food.

On the more creative side, La Brea Bakery in Los Angeles went from one-room bakeshop to multibillion-dollar global conglomerate by pioneering artisan-industrial technology: loaves shaped by gentle robots and factory assembly lines adapted to the same kind of slow, careful procedures used by small bakeries. The result was a true hybrid, combining a bit of the artisan spirit with a bit of the industrial method.

Whether through small, unfranchised bakeries, strip-mall chains, or industrial artisans like La Brea, the dream of good bread, European-style, was no longer confined to coastal cities. By the turn of the millennium, it had reached consumers in every corner of “the United States of Arugula.” With this delicious bread, of course, came new dreams about society.

OH, YOU POOR THING

A mile from the heart of Berkeley’s Gourmet Ghetto, Steve Sullivan’s Acme bakery is a good place to observe the artisan bread revolution in its highest form. This is the real deal: a small, unfranchised neighborhood bakery producing slow-fermented, handcrafted bread. It doesn’t sell sandwiches. It doesn’t sell coffee or cookies. It sells bread.

On a spring morning two years ago, I queued in a convivial crush outside Acme’s clacking screen door. When my turn came to squeeze into the hot, floury shop, I paid \$8 for an Italian bâtard and the best walnut levain in the Western Hemisphere. The levain wouldn’t make it home uneaten—that much I knew—so I thought I might as well sit down with a cup of coffee from Alice Waters’s Café Fanny next door while I tore through its malty mix of chewy crumb and toasted nuts.

Acme’s walnut levain—organic flour, natural starter, malted barley, water, walnuts, and salt—has only a quarter of the ingredi-

ents found in Wonder bread. Its crumb's intense, almost beery flavor comes from the unrushed work of microbes—the slow artistry of *Saccharomyces* and *Lactobacilli*. Its dark, almost scorched crust gives a smoky, nutty counterpoint to the crumb's tang. Considering that, when stripped of fats, sweeteners, and added flavorings, most of bread's taste comes from browning reactions in the crust, we Americans eat our bread far too pale. Steve Sullivan knew better.

In 1983, fresh from a stint at Chez Panisse—what was then, and still is, the epicenter of California cuisine—Steve Sullivan opened Acme with a loan from Doobie Brothers guitarist Patrick Simmons. Acme now has a wholesale bakery making loaves for local restaurants and three retail outlets, including one in San Francisco's ultra-high-end Embarcadero Market. But Sullivan has resisted expansion beyond that, focusing instead on community, quality, and craft. The payoff has been a fierce continued attention to flavor and the jovial community feeling surrounding the bakery.

These are big ideas in small loaves: dreams of pleasure, community, and authenticity, a glimpse into the possibility of a different kind of food system. But, after shelling out \$8 for a couple of pounds of bread, I was painfully aware that these are also exclusive dreams.

In *The Commune Cookbook*, Crescent Dragonwagon railed against the “elitist thinking” behind America's taste for industrial white bread. The introduction of inexpensive refined flours in the nineteenth century had allowed the country to share in aspirational dreams of high-class living embodied in light, white loaves. Dark breads, she observed perceptively, had become more and more associated with social inferiority.⁵⁷ Today, however, thanks to the convergence of counterculture and industry, we live in a world that presents a mirror image of Dragonwagon's.

A *Washington Post* article commemorating the moment in 2009 when whole wheat bread sales surpassed white for the first time in U.S. history explained this reversal. Growing awareness of the importance of the fiber and nutrients found in whole grains played a role, but so did status aspirations. Today, the article observed, whole wheat bread “signifies the sophistication of your palate, your appreciation for texture and variety. . . . The grainier you like it, the more refined your sensibilities. The darker it is, the greater your chance

for enlightenment.”⁵⁸ Industrial white bread has completed its two-hundred-year trajectory from modern marvel to low-class item. As the spokeswoman for a food industry-affiliated nonprofit nutrition policy organization concluded, “It used to be, ‘Oh, you poor thing, you have that nasty brown bread.’ . . . Now it's, ‘Oh, you poor thing. You have that nasty white bread.’ ”⁵⁹

White bread still sells—Americans bought 1.5 billion loaves of it in 2009—but its consumer profile has changed, settling into the lower classes. And while references to nutrition facts give distaste for white bread a patina of scientific truth, elites' feelings toward people who choose to eat “unhealthy” bread are anything but objective. Just as in the 1920s, disdain for difference can come cloaked in seemingly neutral discussions of healthy eating and responsible choices.

Given the country's post-1970s preoccupation with fitness and body image, we could take the *Post*'s analysis a step further. Caring about health and social status are not separate matters. Today, showing interest in healthy eating is an essential piece of the performance of eliteness. Maintaining a fit-looking body, keeping abreast of new health food trends, and at least paying lip service to scientific nutrition advice proclaim one's superior virtue and self-control to the world. In this way, concern with health and fitness helps tacitly justify social inequality: a person's elite status and fit body may, in fact, have arisen from destructive behavior—like insider trading and bulimia—or just some lucky inheritance, but the visual spectacle of an affluent healthism declares, “I earned my wealth through discipline, self-sacrifice, and hard work, just like I earned this body.”

Thus, something as simple as bread choice is an act of social positioning. Bread choice stakes a claim to a particular identity, but also opens one up to others' ideas about what that selection means. Some manifestations of the white trash revival try to reclaim white bread eating as a virtuous cultural celebration, an authentic piece of southern regional foodways, as Ernst Matthew Mickler's *White Trash Cookbook* contends. African Americans join in this, as well, touting Wonder bread's place in traditional soul food. Even an article in the haute cuisine magazine *Saveur* admitted, “Sopping up [Kansas City barbeque] may well be the only legitimate use for spongy, store-bought white bread.”⁶⁰

Industrial white bread may also serve as an edible emblem of class solidarity. "I've wanted to scream this for so long / There is no shame in the trailer park / or white bread, or government cheese / There is no shame on the victims of poverty," the hard-core band Crimson Spectre thrashed out in its "White Trash Manifesto."⁶¹ But all those acts of positive self-positioning face a grim association between white bread, failure, and irresponsibility. "White Trash Momma," a song by another heavy metal band, expressed this connection even more brutally. In it, a woman "raised on white bread" slides into crack use and prostitution, sealing her "white trash fate."⁶²

In the end, there's something sad about the way counterculture dreams of building good society through good bread morphed into reinforced social distinctions. Nevertheless, this wasn't an intended or inevitable outcome of counterculture food activism: large-scale and unexpected shifts in both how Americans thought about health and the very nature of the U.S. economy sealed hippie brown bread's fate (in a fancy wrapper with a high price tag). Certainly the world is better because of counterculture efforts to raise awareness about the politics of eating. And we gained an artisanal bread revolution along the way.

The social dreams embodied in that artisanal revolution may sometimes seem precious and far removed from the daily grind of poverty evoked in white trash rhetoric. But this doesn't mean that they should be abandoned. I, for one, crave the world of community, cultural vibrancy, environmental responsibility, and alimentary diversity embodied in a fresh-baked loaf of local artisanal bread. But if the story of white bread's journey from modern marvel to low-class symbol teaches anything, it is that food dreamers must be ready to modify their vision if it does more to reinforce social stratification than to build a better world.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND GOOD BREAD

There is so much fog around the moral high ground.

—Peter Carey

BEGINNINGS

There is a seven-inch crack in the ceramic bowl I use to make bread most weeks. I never wash the bowl, just give it a quick rinse and a wipe. It's not hygienic. Millions of leftover microbes colonize the cruddy fissure. A slurry of flour and water begins to bubble with life when sealed in the bowl overnight, and after two days, it stinks of overripe fruit. What had been a clean white paste now looks like the surface of an uninhabitable swamp planet. It's easy to imagine why, before microscopes, people turned to theories of spontaneous generation to explain yeasty effervescence. Today, plagued and blessed by our acute awareness of invisible life, we associate the change in my bowl with rogue microbial colonies and it makes us squirm. "Shouldn't you use some bleach on that bowl?" a friend asks.

These days, playing with microbes at home is generally considered improper behavior. My fermentation experiments are pretty tame; my wife's raw milk cheeses are a littler edgier. Then there's this from the "wild fermentation" activist Sandor Katz: "After a goat slaughter, I fermented some of the meat for a couple weeks. I placed the meat in a gallon jar, then filled it with a mixture of all the other live ferments I had around: wine, vinegar, miso, yogurt, and sauerkraut juice. I covered the jar and left in an unobtrusive corner of our basement [for two weeks]. It bubbled and smelled good. . . . [Later], as it cooked, an