

52 Loaves: One Man's Relentless Pursuit of Truth, Meaning, and a Perfect Crust

William Alexander

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52 Loaves is not really about the pursuit of truth, meaning, and a perfect crust, as the subtitle claims—but readers can indulge the author his bit of literary embellishment. This book, a breezy, captivating account of the author's journey into the art, science, and mystique of bread baking, is actually about pursuing only one thing: a perfect crust.

The premise is simple and believable. William Alexander, who lives just north of New York City, while breakfasting at a “swanky New York restaurant,” encounters what he considers to be the perfect loaf of bread. Inspired, he devotes an entire year trying to reproduce that loaf in his home kitchen. One loaf a week yields fifty-two loaves.

Along the way, Alexander shares not only a detailed account of his experiences but also an entire library of information on the various facets of bread and bread-making. Readers learn the differences between stone-ground wheat and wheat ground by metal rollers, the intricacies of sourdough, and the values inherent in different types of wheat. In one of the more fascinating chapters, Alexander relates the story of how American bakers and millers and the research of a Jewish immigrant doctor saved the South from the ravages of pellagra.

During the course of his baking year, Alexander visits a commercial artisan bakery in New Jersey, a yeast manufacturing facility in Canada, and the bread-baking competition at the New York State Fair. Alexander even grows his own wheat, and the segment on how he harvests, threshes (by hand), and winnows his wheat is captivating and enlightening. The author goes farther than the average home baker ever will, but the resulting story is truly entertaining.

Toward the end of the journey we find the author in a French monastery teaching a monk how to bake bread. In return, the monks indulge in some teaching as well. Even the retelling of the episode has something to say about living that goes beyond the mere art of bread-baking. Maybe *52 Loaves* is about the pursuit of truth and meaning, after all.

By way of conclusion and lagniappe, Alexander offers recipes, including directions for levain and its use. All you need now is flour, yeast, salt, and a bit of water.

This book will appeal to anyone interested in bread, baking, history, and an account of a year well spent.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (May / June 2010)

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