

Thought for the month July 2018

It's said that smell is the sense that most evokes memory. That being the case, two smells for me are evocative of childhood memories visiting my grandparents in their village near Barnsley, South Yorkshire, and by association in my young mind, Yorkshire as a whole.

The first is the sulphurous, rounded and slightly sweet smell of coal fires burning as they used to from every house of the pit village my grandmother spent most of her life in. The other, more significant to me, is the smell of baking bread. Grandma's signature was simple but about the most delicious thing you could taste – white bread rolls that in her part of the world were called 'scufflers'. My sister and I would watch and when we pestered her enough she let us join in the kneading, although as she always remarked, you had to be really angry to knead properly so our efforts were probably not very effective. On one occasion she let us shape the unbaked scufflers into animals and soon enough a motley tray of bloated giraffes, hedgehogs and leg-less birds emerged from the steaming oven, to be consumed with hilarity by the assembled adults.

I've never been able to reproduce that taste, or the aroma that went into its making. As far as I can recall there were no special ingredients in the mix, other than the inclusion of milk in the liquids. No doubt my use of half white, half wholemeal flour changes the flavour somewhat but it's more that there's something missing than anything extra masking what is otherwise there.

One thing however that I learned from my Grandmother's hands is however that home-made bread is in every way superior to anything you can buy, and not just for the taste. As with any food, being fully involved in its making is deeply satisfying – intellectually stimulating, physically exercising and emotionally engaging – in a very real way, part of the consumption is in its creation. Baking bread produces just about the most incredible aromas, the working of the dough is wonderfully tactile and the sight of the loaves slowly rising in the tins is golden. Not only that, bake your own bread and you cut out all the extra gobbledigook ingredients designed to extend shelf-life, have complete control over the provenance of the essential ingredients, can add your own special touches and create whatever size and shape of loaf or rolls you want to eat. Objections? Time perhaps, but I've got my roll making down to about twenty minutes (loaves a little longer, since they need to be knocked back part way through rising); then around twenty minutes in the oven about an hour or so later on.

For me, wherever I am, making bread is a constant. Whatever else is going on, the simple transformation of flour, water, fat and yeast into a thing of sensory delight somehow sets the world to rights. After all, bread is fundamental in culture the world over; so if we can make and share bread together perhaps there are no divides that can't be bridged.