

EXPAT LIFE

IN THAILAND

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Stepladder to bread heaven

Being Indian, living in India, bread is not our mainstay. We thrive on chapatis – which is freshly made flatbread, rolled out and grilled on a warm hotplate (tawa), fresh and fabulous. It is whole grain, and can also be made from a mixture of healthy grains, depending on the region you belong to. We eat it, much like bread, to go with our daals and curries. It's everyone's favourite bread. One fries it, one stuffs it and one makes a roll, on the go, with just about any available filling, including jams.

My bread, is it as good as yours

by Kamalini Natesan

Where has bread come from? Well, the earliest known form is as close to the Indian chapati as it gets, or tortillas from Mexico - the earliest bread was made in or around 8000BC in the Middle East, specifically Egypt. The quern was the first known grinding tool.

Crushed grain made flatbread. Voilà!

As a young girl, I do remember biting into white bread slices: untoasted, slathered with thick yellow Amul butter, and gobbling it down, barely chewing. Bliss.

Hunger wasn't what drove me to plunge into our Frigidaire – greed for the taste of that thin slice of white Britannia bread was the driver. I was very young and plump then. Perhaps the reason for my ever expanding girth was that bread, those empty calories as I now understand. At age five or six, who cares!

Now, in Bangkok, at a far later stage in life, I have such a variety of breads to choose from now, don't I! Bread and I, we've come a long, long way since.

Sukhumvit Soi 20's German bakery, Bei Otto, was the first bread place that I observed when we were out and about looking for a condominium to suit our needs. That was the street I so wanted to set up our home upon, and we did, much to my delight. I became a regular there, picking up all sorts of bakes to bite into. Oh! the joys of good bread! People talk about lowering one's carb cravings. In Bangkok, I can say that the cravings rose to newer heights, and I cannot deny myself the pleasures of biting into luscious warm bakery bread. Their rye bread is the best there is.



It's our bread.

At twenty five, I met someone who introduced me to five star bread. These fancy breads were sold at five star hotel bakeries, for those hankering after good bread. It transformed my outlook toward bread. I tasted a wholemeal bread sandwich for the first time, and It was divine, food of the Gods. Thus, began a whole new phase in my bread journey. I developed a hankering, where there had been none.

This was not bread I could afford to buy. I awaited this person's visit, for whenever she came, she never forgot to bring our family a loaf of bread – it was wholegrain, or corn bread, and once she brought along rye bread. I was left gaping. Once I had delicately sliced the bread, and tasted it, I saved it up, to let it see me through ten days of heavenly consumption. No one else at home cared as much. They were quite satisfied with industrial bread, neatly sliced by a machine, easy to slap and shape into a sandwich. I wanted the rough cut, the taste of graininess to dissolve in my mouth, I saw myself as some sort of rustic gentlewoman: every morsel was delicately savoured – its taste lingering for hours afterward, in my mouth, and in a content tummy.

Then I met a Dutchman at age thirty: he was a different

level of breadman. He was my boss, and I worked out of his home. He introduced me to more than just corn or rye bread – there was: Sourdough, Multigrain, Focaccia, brioche, Baguette, Cheesy bread, Ciabatta and Soda bread. I contained my excitement overall, never refusing a slice or two, when he made himself a delicious sandwich with Gouda cheese, ham and other exotic fare. It was addictive. I would wait for one pm, our lunchbreak.

An exchange offering was rapidly devised and I carried over chapati rolls in my lunchbox. We were both happy.

This joyful experience of unequal barter, left an indelible impression.

I never again bought bread from the local market, and waited to be wealthy enough to buy 'five star bread'.

Later in life, a family friend travelled down South and returned armed with a 'cake paatram' (the word paatram means utensil). It was a strange and marvelous contraption – a Bundt cakemaker is the closest description I can think of. It was circular, shaped much like a Bundt cake with a round gap in the middle – and had a stand, upon which sat this holey cake mould. The stand held sand, which, upon being heated, served to warm up the batter, as an oven might do. In turn a beautiful aromatic cake was born, within a matter of forty five minutes. I tried making bread in it, and it was a decent attempt, but that's all it was.

It inspired, and awakened in me, the dream of owning a proper oven someday. I would surely bake well when I had the right equipment, I told myself.

Not until very recently, have I begun my journey as a baker of bread. I have to admit, it took more than two attempts to churn out a bread that was healthy and soft, and one that could be sliced without crumbling. It has been a long while coming, but I can safely say, I can bake bread. It is exhilarating, when the home fills with trails of bread aroma; nothing short of heavenly. It isn't as hard as I imagined it might be.

I had taken baking classes over four years back, and watched fascinated, as yeast worked on dough, followed by the rise of bread. I couldn't wait to replicate the process, yet I didn't follow through with success, at the time. Now's my time it appears.

Why has bread been so vital to my sense of wellbeing? Is it something that stems from being denied good bread – as I see it?

Where I grew up, in Pondicherry, South India, the only bread we students were given was brown in colour, with a sweet aftertaste. It was wholesome and extremely filling. I would tear it off and plunge large chunks into a bowl of warm milk, and slurp it up with gusto; soft and beautiful as it was. It was comforting and it was all I needed after rigorous sporting activities, as was the discipline.

When I left Pondicherry, at the edge of my innocent years, I was denied this bread thereafter. I only ever ate bread in the city I was transferred to, when faced with extreme hunger. The five star bread still evaded me, as did the brown bread of Pondicherry. This longing, admixed with the taste of brown bread, has stayed with me. I wish

to replicate the experience.

Bangkok has more than fulfilled an innate need of consuming good, wholesome bread. I've partaken of wonderful sandwiches: two large slices slapped onto greens, tomatoes, some ham, some guacamole and I can't complain. There is no dearth of variety, fillings in sandwiches, which was essentially created as an on-the-go meal for working people. It has come a really long way, and now this ubiquitous meal – is of such a staggering variety, that its reach and gamut will perhaps will never be exhausted.

Never again need I worry over how to and where to go for good bread, that fills me to the brim.

Holey Artisan Bakery is another favourite in this city of Bangkok, and there many others, difficult to keep track of. Clearly, this is the right country for diversity of cuisines, including European fare, where a humble sandwich makes for a perfect meal. Subway took the lead in customising sandwich needs, and I do love me a good BLT. The Subway sandwich takeout was founded in 1965, by in August 1965 by Fred DeLuca, a 17-year-old who needed money for college.

Americans, it is known, eat more than 300 million sandwiches a day. The first sandwich recipe appeared in an American magazine in 1815 - it is believed, much after it had already found its way into English homes. It's also a school lunch staple around the world.

Sandwich – the name was adopted only in the 18th century for John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich. It was something devised for him to eat at his gambling table, without having to move. And there we were, the first sandwich, named after him.

Yet, every new bread I find, I seek to somehow have it light up my being with its taste, hoping to find that girl, whose milk soaked bread filled her to the brim. Bread is not just an amalgamation of various grains, is it – it's a whole life lost in history – wrapped in a yearning to return someplace, and spread its grainy perfume and never let go.

What's your bread story?

