



Breaking Bread

There is a mathematical formula for a perfect slice of toast, but I don’t care to know it. If I’m buying the wrong bread, storing it improperly, or buttering at the imprecise moment, so be it! You can share your age-old secrets with someone else. As we are wont to do, I blame my family. Our ritual of running up to the corner for a loaf of Caputo Bakery bread to turn into morning toast cannot be explained. We love it so, that first crunch of the day, and yet we don’t feel pressured to master its art. We are too distracted by television news, overlapping conversations, a ringing phone or doorbell to notice our no-good toaster starting to smoke. *You have to watch the toaster*, we have reprimanded each other for years like children still learning to be more careful. None of us are perfect; let burnt toast be burnt toast. I’m happy here in toaster darkness, taking my chances at achieving the optimum balance of outside crunch and inside softness on a toaster so cheap your wedding registry would weep. At the very least, I rescue it with globs of jelly and butter, or cheddar cheese, or salt and a ripe tomato. Then, without exception, reach for the bread knife and try again. SYLVIE MORGAN BROWN

AN EDUCATION Cooking in a 600-degree wood oven for eight hours a day, five days a week, bestows all sorts of lessons in “burnt.” There’s the burning of flesh, of course: Oily Boston mackerel sometimes spontaneously combust into fiery balls of omega-3s. Half chickens initially evoke leisurely family dinners, though after a few weeks of poultry smoke that lingers in your hair they begin to recall the rancorous arguments across the table more than the happy reunions. Pork chops, seared in mere minutes, ooze savory juices best saved for the roasting of accompanying potatoes. Mellow black sea bass, perched a safe distance from the flames, turn buttery and smooth beneath their charred skin. Vegetables, too, benefit from the kiss of the fire. Shishitos emerge as blistered salty bites, to be finished with grassy olive oil, a squeeze of lemon and washed down with pre-dinner cocktails. Escarole, sliced in half, fanned out on a rack and shoved perilously close to the base of the flames, transforms from a forlorn leafy sideshow into a luscious base for any protein, succulent at its core and crisp and black at its edges. But after all the careful rotating of skillets and testing of flesh, my favorite smoke of all remains that of the humble toast, cut thickly from slightly stale country bread, doused with olive oil and cooked directly on the floor of the oven, absorbing all that is cooking around it—endlessly complex and entirely perfect in its simplicity. LARA BELKIN

ON THE NOSE “In the medieval world, cooking, perfumery, and medicine were entwined,” write Mandy Aftel and Daniel Patterson in *The Art of Flavor*. “Little distinction was made between end uses of ingredients... to bring both exquisite fragrance and extraordinary flavor.” I am mesmerized by the commutable principles of cooking and fragrance composition that can play out in any old kitchen. It is a mental gear shift to reassign kitchen activities from taste to smell to coax out the most aromatic meal, instead of only being satisfied once it’s sufficiently tasty. Cooking with one’s nose means sniffing every fresh herb, spice, citrus, and agent of funk at your disposal and employing them to optimum effect. Spices become a focal point and the food itself, a second thought: humble potatoes, bitter endive, some firm tofu, the simpler, the better. I’ve found that generous heapings of freshly chopped mint, parsley, and coriander lend a heady, herbaceous, and bitter liveliness to everything from yogurt to bean stew. Employ a scattering of lime zest to lift just about anything in its path, from salad greens to vanilla ice cream. And then there are the most pungent materials: your fish sauces, your fermented stuff, your funky cheeses—the jujitsu of olfactory cooking. Balance them just right or embolden them to take over a dish. Cooking dinner can fill the belly and offer nutrition; it can also be a reimagining of food’s magical sensory powers as you forge a trail through new and uncharted compositions, nose-first. NATALIE TOREN