

# A Recipe for Bread

Eve Levin, *University of Kansas*

*Keywords:* Bread. Baking. Food history. Russia--History. Friendship.

---

Sandra Levy and I became friends 45 years ago, in 1975, when we were both graduate students in Russian history at Indiana University. Two years later we decided to get an apartment together, and for the next four years we were roommates, sometimes with a third person to share the costs. Our friendship continued after we left Bloomington. We were professional colleagues, Sandra as a librarian and I as a professor, and we met up most years at the ASEES conference. She functioned as my “on-call” Slavic librarian, tracking down obscure publications for me on short notice. In addition, she and I visited back and forth, sometimes celebrating holidays together along with our families. On several occasions, we vacationed together. In this essay, I am trying to plait together the many strands of our relationship.

## Recipes

On our excursions to local museums and country markets, Sandra frequently picked up cookbooks as souvenirs. She liked the cookbooks that described simple home-style dishes, laced with folklore, rather than the gourmet variety. I’m not sure how often she tried out recipes from these books. But certainly she appreciated cookbooks as a genre of literature. And so with this essay, which I present for reading enjoyment more so than for utilization in the kitchen.

In graduate school, both Sandra and I focused on premodern Russian women’s history. That led us inevitably to curiosity about the meals those Old Russian women might have cooked. Evidence existed, we discovered, but it was limited. Foreign travelers described the typical diet of Muscovites and their style of feasts.<sup>1</sup> It was Sandra who first introduced me to *Domostroi*, a sixteenth-century book of household management; as I recall, she wrote a paper about it. *Domostroi* was intended for prosperous but non-noble families and it contains many chapters describing types of foods and when to serve them.<sup>2</sup> It also contains some specific recipes in Chapter 65, primarily for different kinds of mildly alcoholic drinks, as well as two versions of a turnip pudding, one domestic and one from Constantinople. Chapter 66 describes how to make

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, see the accounts of Richard Chancellor and of Giles Fletcher, published in Lloyd E. Berry and Robert O. Crummey, *Rude and Barbarous Kingdom: Russia in the Accounts of Sixteenth-Century English Voyagers* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), pp. 36-38; 237-239.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Johnston Pouncy, ed., *The Domostroi: Rules for Russian Household in the Time of Ivan the Terrible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), Chapters 11, 29, 42-58, 64-66, pp. 80-85, 124-127, 147-170, 190-204. The Russian publication numbers the chapters differently: V. V. Kolesov and V. V. Rozhdestvenskaia, eds. *Domostroi* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2000), Chapters 15, 33, 45-58, 64-66, pp. 22-25, 40-41, 51-60, 64-72.

spiced watermelon pickles, as well as other sorts of preserved fruit.<sup>3</sup> None of these recipes include any information about the proportions of ingredients; the Muscovite cooks presumably figured it out on their own.

The author of *Domostroi* was concerned with the economic aspects of feeding a household, as well as issues of piety and propriety—serving the right foods to each class of person appropriate to the Orthodox season. Another text of that period, the *Secret of Secrets*, also contains substantial attention to food, but with a different focus—on health and libido. The *Secret of Secrets* was a medieval pseudo-Aristotelian text, incorporating ancient dietary advice filtered through the Islamic world. The East Slavic version of the text appeared in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century as a substantially emended translation from the Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> Mostly this text presents types of food and methods of preparation that are healthy (or not, under some circumstances), but without specific proportions. However, one section, an interpolation from Moses Maimonides' treatise "On Coitus," provides specific amounts:

And thus also Avensina (Avicenna) has prescribed an omelet for the strengthening of that thing... One should take sparrow's brains and dove's brains, fifty of each, and twenty sparrow's egg-yolks and twelve yolks of young chicken's eggs, and having boiled some mutton finely chopped, some of the liquid only and  $\frac{3}{8}$  of a grivenka of onion juice and  $\frac{5}{8}$  of a grivenka of carrot juice and salt as much as is necessary of those (above-mentioned) herbs [long pepper, galangal, ginger, cloves, muscat flower, and nutmeg] and five zolotniks of cows' butter, one should fry all this and eat it and wash it down with a wine with a good aroma and not too sweet.<sup>5</sup>

This recipe comes close to the precision of modern recipes, although many of the ingredients would be difficult to obtain.

Other texts from the Muscovite period are rarely as precise. Archbishop Afanasii of Kholmogory sometimes includes specific amounts in his recipes for medicinal vodkas, oils, and ointments, but not uniformly. His recipe for an absinthe vodka directs:

Take two pounds of anise and three-fourths of a pound of absinthe and pour it into a bucket of wine [meaning vodka] and let it stand for two days, then redistill it.

But the recipe for the absinthe oil, which follows immediately afterwards, contains little information about proportions of ingredients, but it does elaborate intricate instructions their preparation:

Take ripe absinthe, which would be [judged] from a very ripe color, and dry it a little. Once dried, cut the leaves from the twigs, place in tub so that it can be heated a little.

---

<sup>3</sup> Pouncy, pp. 196-200; Kolesov and Rozhdestvenskaia, pp. 67-70.

<sup>4</sup> W. F. Ryan and Moshe Taube, *The Secret of Secrets: The East Slavic Version* (London: Warburg Institute, 2019). For information on the provenance and dating, see the Introduction, pp. 1-59. For examples of the dietary advice, see pp. 246-291, 333-347.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan and Taube, p. 273. The translation is theirs.

And after that, pour in warm vodka and let it soak for a week or more, then add a lot of salt to it. And when it is infused, put it in a boiler and distill it into a glass vessel, and pour in warm tree [olive] oil, and let it stand for two days. And when it has stood, take Rhenish vinegar and pour in the oil with the herbs onto a griddle and cook over a fire until the liquid has boiled away.

But note the moisture in it on the ladle, and put it on the fire, and when it boils and begins to crackle, remove it from the fire at that time. And filter that oil through a cloth, and once again add fresh herbs to it, and boil as before three times. And then it will be absinthe oil.<sup>6</sup>

In order to replicate Archbishop Afanasiï's recipes in the format of our day, the preparer would need to experiment quite a bit to determine measurements and cooking times.

Later Russian cookbooks, such as the famous Imperial era volume by Elena Molokhovets, provide recipes that resemble our own. The weights and measures in her recipes could be a hurdle to reproducing them now, but for translator Joyce Toomre's handy conversion tables.<sup>7</sup>

Mentions of bread are fewer in dietary and health texts than we might expect, given how ubiquitous it was in Muscovites' diets. Yet one healing book (lechebnik) starts with a discussion of bread, thus testifying to its importance:

About Rye Bread:

Rye bread in substance is warmer than barley, and it is appropriate for healthy people to eat it, and it gives them strength. It is appropriate for sick people to eat wheat bread, which is better for nutrition.

But if in some people the stomach does not digest substances, it is not good to eat rye bread because gastric disease cannot be overcome, but only with great distress can it be eliminated. Each person ought to avoid underbaked bread, because great and serious illness arises from it. Also we don't eat hot or too soft bread; but let it sit overnight.

There are three common types of bread. A large one has within it much softness, but its crust is hard and it does not nourish the body. It is not quickly expelled, but is retained in the belly, and thick crumbs inflate the body, giving rise to a harmful moisture.

A bread that is fine and not large, from it the heat will pass through and dampness is drawn from it. That bread is digested in the belly and passes out of it.

---

<sup>6</sup> T. V. Panich, *Literaturnoe tvorchestvo Afanasiia Kholmogorskogo* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1996), pp. 194-195.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce Toomre, *Classic Russian Cooking: Elena Molokhovets' A Gift to Young Housewives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). For the tables of weights and measures, see Appendix B, pp. 96-97.

The middle bread is one that is not over fermented and not over salted; it is the most healthy of all. It feeds the body and causes the growth of good blood, and strengthens people's substance. But we understand that it is not good to be soft or stale, as explained above.

Bread that is mixed and baked with cherry juice, and is placed near the coals of the fire, so that it is soft from them, should be discarded.

Bread that is baked with slashes on it quickly decays and is not nourishing to the human body.

Eat rye pudding after an illness for care of the heart.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the advice in this passage seems sensible to me, such as that to avoid eating undercooked bread. But I have frequently eaten bread fresh from the oven, and bread that is moist on the inside and crusty on the outside, never with ill effects. I also find it hard to believe that putting decorative slashes on the top of a loaf would make it unsuitable for human consumption. I'm intrigued by the idea of adding cherry juice to rye bread dough, but I haven't tried it. I wonder why, among all the liquids that can be used to moisten bread flour, the author of this text singled out cherry juice, and declared it to be problematical.

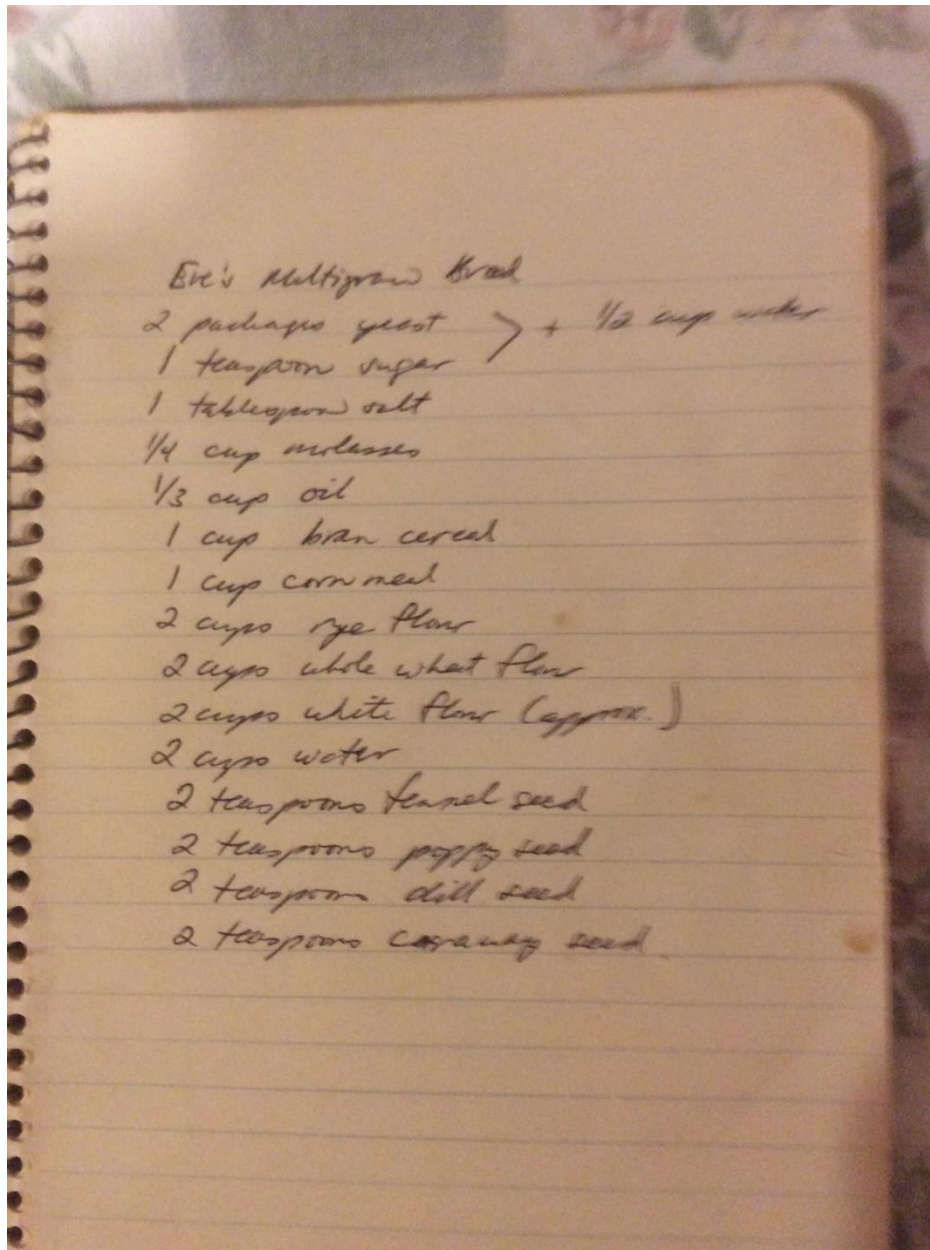
### **“Eve’s Multigrain Bread”**

In the Levin/Levy household, Sandra became the chief pie-maker, and I became the chief bread-baker. We both enjoyed good baked goods, but our modest budget did not suffice to cover the cost of bakery products. We could afford store-brand versions of Wonder bread, but we didn't like it. Consequently, I baked bread every week. Baking time was Sunday morning, when the university library was closed (we were supposed to go to church, we guessed) and the TV station ran a double feature of Star Trek reruns.

I experimented with recipes, occasionally inventing my own. Not all of my experiments were successful. An attempt at a rye-flour honey cake turned out to be so heavy and peculiar-tasting that we didn't finish it. The multigrain recipe here comes from that time, although I have no memory of it. Instead, I stumbled across the recipe recently, recorded in my own handwriting. It was on one of the blank pages at the back of a notebook of favorite family recipes that my mother and my sister Anne copied for me.

---

<sup>8</sup> “Lechebnik,” *Pamiatniki literatury drevnei Rusi: konets XVI-nachalo XVII vekov* (Moscow: Khudozhevstvennaia literature, 1987), p. 502. My translation departs from the modern Russian translation provided on p. 503.



Eve's Multi-Grain Bread Recipe. Photograph provided by the author.

The recipe has only a list of ingredients, with measurements but no instructions on mixing or baking. It was designed to produce two loaves—that is, enough for Sandra and me from Sunday to Sunday.

Because the covid pandemic has made visits to stores inadvisable, I have returned to my graduate-school practice of baking my own bread. And having rediscovered this old recipe, I

decided to try it. However, I needed to make some adjustments. First, I halved the recipe, because I now live alone. In addition, I had to make some substitutions. I ran out of molasses some months ago, but I had found that the sorghum syrup languishing on the pantry shelf made a reasonable alternative. Lacking poppy seed and dill seed, I substituted sesame seed and dill weed, respectively. Because I am more health-conscious now than I was in my 20s, I reduced the amount of salt and the amount of oil. I also reduced the amount of fennel seed; once I ruined a loaf of bread by adding too much. In the process of mixing the dough, I discovered that the amount of white flour called for in the original recipe was about 4 times what was actually needed. Maybe the difference lies in the very dry drought conditions here in Kansas in 2020 compared with the humidity of Indiana in the late 1970s.

Here is the updated recipe, with the addition of instructions:

Mix together in a large bowl:

- 1 package dry yeast
- 1/2 teaspoon sugar
- 1/4 cup warm water

Let sit for 15 minutes. Meanwhile, in a separate heat-proof bowl, place:

- 1/2 cup corn meal

Pour over the corn meal:

- 1 cup boiling water

Stir the corn meal and water together, and let it cool until it is warm, but not hot. Add the corn meal/water mixture to the yeast/sugar mixture, and stir until blended.

Add:

- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons oil
- 2 tablespoons sorghum syrup
- 1/2 teaspoon fennel seed, crushed
- 1 teaspoon sesame seed
- 1/2 teaspoon dill weed
- 1 teaspoon caraway seed

Mix thoroughly. Then add:

- 1/2 cup bran cereal (straws, not flakes)
- 1 cup rye flour



1 cup whole wheat flour

Blend well. The dough will be thick. Measure out:

1/2 cup white flour

Sprinkle about 1/4 cup of this white flour on a kneading board. Turn out the dough from the bowl onto the kneading board. Knead for 20 minutes, adding more white flour as necessary to keep the dough from sticking.

After kneading, form the dough into a ball and place it in a greased bowl. Turn the dough to grease it on all sides. Cover the bowl with a cloth, and place it to rise in a warm, dark place. (An oven heated to 125 degrees and then turned off is ideal.)

Let the dough rise for 1 1/2 hours. Then sprinkle the kneading board with more white flour, and turn out the dough onto it. Knead the dough for 10 minutes.

Shape the dough into a half sphere, and place it on a greased pan. Cover the loaf with a cloth, and let rise for 1 1/4 hours.

Bake the bread at 350 degrees for 45-50 minutes.

The bread is dense and fine-grained, not very crusty. When it is cool, it can be sliced quite thin. The flavor is reminiscent of Russian dark rye, slightly aromatic because of the seeds.



Eve's Multi-Grain Bread. Photograph provided by the author.