FRENCH TOAST:

LASTING INDULGENCE

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Mmm . . . . warm buttered French toast. The thought of “breakfast” brings to mind many different things to many different people. The options are numerous and the ideal will vary from person to person. The most popular breakfast foods are those that evoke warm memories and for most people, there is something extremely appealing and comforting about breakfast. Of all the delectable breakfast choices, French toast is one of the very most comforting. It is a dish, served mainly at breakfast, that most everyone has had and everyone enjoys. It has a quality not unlike that of the little black dress in the world of fashion; both are simple, can be dressed up or dressed down, and both always work. French toast can be quite simple or quite complicated, however either way it is extremely pleasing to the palate. After all, bread served any style, is always pleasing.

Although its origins are humble, French toast has persisted over time as a breakfast staple in the United States. It is simple, satisfying, and delicious. Bread has been a sustaining diet staple for most of human history. French toast is simply one of the most scrumptious ways to transform plain bread into something warm and tantalizing. It has been proven to be the best method of stimulating the sweet taste buds at breakfast, after having invested little time or money. There is literally no limit to the ways a classic French toast recipe can be adapted in order to elevate its level of decadence. French toast served in any fashion is truly a joy to taste and an experience to behold. The continual juxtaposition of French toast is the fact that, even when the ingredients are quite simple, people feel lucky to have eaten French toast.

The dish Americans commonly refer to as “French toast” is known by many different names the world over. “*Pain perdu”* in France, “eggy bread” or “Poor Knights of Windsor” in England, “*armer ritter”* in Germany, Spanish toast, German toast, Queen Esther’s bread to name a few more, and the list goes on and on. It can be enjoyed in numerous countries and is familiar to many cultures around the world. What Americans have come to call “French toast,” often by other names, is a universally pleasing dish. In fact one can reasonably conclude that French toast, renamed for the “French” style bread often used to make it, was actually invented by the Romans long before France was on the map.[1] While the Romans are famous for inventing lasting technology such as arches, paved roads, and concrete, French toast should certainly be credited to them as one of the world’s greatest dietary innovations, if only based on its longevity.

The latest *Oxford English Dictionary* defines French toast as, “Cookery of any of various kinds of toasted bread, especially bread soaked in seasoned beaten egg and fried until brown typically eaten as a dish at breakfast. . .”[2] A list of ingredients for this dish would hardly elicit any real excitement. And yet, the simple ingredients are also the brilliance of French toast. The earliest known written recipe dates back to the 5th Century C.E. where in the Roman cookbook *Apicius de re Coquinaria* it is described simply as, “Another Sweet Dish” (*aliter dulcia*), and is comprised of sliced fine white bread with the crusts removed, which soak in milk and are fried in oil and covered with honey before being served.[3] This antiquated example is surprisingly similar to modern

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[1] Joseph Vehling, trans., *Apicius Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome* (New York: Dover, 1977), 55.

[2] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.vv. "French toast," accessed October 7, 2014, http://www.oed.com/.

[3] Vehling, *Apicius Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome*, 172.

recipes, which is astonishing considering its age. It is the simplicity of the recipe that allows for it to stand the test of time, and to be replicated over and over again.

The Apicius recipe appears to be the basis for the way the dish would be prepared thereafter. The name given by the Romans, “another sweet dish” while blasé and non-descript, undoubtedly positions it as a sweet treat and a meal which would recurrently straddle the line of breakfast and dessert. Eggs or egg yolks would soon be added to the milk (or cream) in this basic preparation fairly soon either for added moisture or added protein, if not both. Recipes for what would come to be known as French toast can be found from medieval Europe consistently through today.[4] Although it can never be known how truly popular these recipes have been in the past, the existence of them in cookbooks over such an expansive period of time speaks to the quality of taste the meal. And though there are many names for French toast, the ingredients and the preparation are surprisingly similar in every instance.[5]

Making French toast is quite simple, and in its most basic form the dish could be enjoyed in the most common of households. However, French toast is an epicurean anomaly in the sense that although it contains (mostly) common ingredients, it has traditionally been consumed by virtually all levels of society, including the elite, with the only exception being the very poorest who could not afford the ingredients. More often throughout history, foods that were considered “common” were consumed by common folk, while foods that were considered elite were almost exclusively consumed by the

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[4] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.vv. "French toast."

[5] Craig Claiborne, *Craig Claiborne's New York Times Food Encyclopedia* (New York: Random House, 1994),178.

elite. This was mostly due to prohibitive costs of certain foods. A cookbook from the eminent Maestro Martino of Como, the famous fifteenth century Italian chef who purportedly cooked for kings and the pope, includes a recipe for "Golden Sops" (*suppe dorate*). The elegance and prestige of the dish is notably raised as the recipe calls for rosewater and saffron:

> *Take some bread slices that have been trimmed of their crusts, and make them into squares, toast slightly, just enough so that they brown on all sides. Then take some eggs that have been beaten together with a generous amount of sugar . . . (and rose water) and soak the bread slices . . . carefully remove them and fry them quickly in a pan with a little butter. . . Then arrange them on a platter and top with a little rose water that you have made yellow with a bit of saffron and a generous amount of sugar.*[6]

The basic recipe for the dish remains the same while the addition of the luxury ingredients makes it suitable for the table of a king. From a historical point of view, it is quite interesting to think that examples of recipes from cookbooks of this time period were almost strictly written for the enjoyment of the elite and reflect meals that would have been eaten by them, as large populations of society would have been illiterate throughout Europe. Also notable, is the mention in both the Apicius and Martino recipes of the removal of the bread crusts. This is a practice that would only be performed by the wealthiest members of society at virtually any time that pre-dates our own. So although the dish that would come to be known as French toast was and is quite basic,

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[6] Luigi Ballerini, ed., *The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book Composed by the Eminent Maestro Martino of Como* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 91.

and presumable comes about as a way to lengthen the shelf life of fresh bread, the fact that it was consumed historically by the elite speaks to the desirability for the taste of the dish.

The "eminent" and no doubt highly skilled Maestro Martino notwithstanding, the larger population of Europe was cooking and eating a more practical version of French toast early on. Written reference to the French recipe appears as early as 1384.[7] The French term for the dish, "*pain perdu*" or "lost bread" is an allusion to the idea that the recipe can rescue bread that is past its prime. Utilizing every last scrap of food was common practice for the common people throughout the medieval period in Europe and elsewhere. It is quite interesting that the Martino recipe does not call for stale bread, but instead provides instructions to first toast the assumed fresh bread to achieve the desired effect. However, that added step would have been unnecessary for cooks attempting to create a tasty meal out of leftovers. Although bread has been a staple since the advent of agriculture around the world, in the pre-modern era it was a costly and labor intensive food item. Utilizing every last bit of edible food was not only practical, but necessary.

Also during the fourteenth century, Edward III of England had established the order of the Poor Knights of Windsor for those who fought against the French and were ruined financially. This new order of the garter would provide some knights in need with pensions and lodgings at Windsor castle. According to legend, the dish which originated in England that is quite similar to French toast was named after these knights when they began serving it as dessert to maintain the status quo, as custom held that a

[7] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.vv. "French toast."

dessert course was required to be served by gentry' families following dinner. The ingredients were inexpensive and when topped with sugared jams and preserves it made a tasty treat for guests of knights who may have been short on resources.[8] Apparently the trend caught on, because the name for French toast in Germany and Scandinavia translates in English to "poor knights."

The folklore related to Poor Knights of Windsor may or may not be accurate, however it hints at the wide appeal of the dish. As previously stated, the list of ingredients is extremely common and the preparation is simple. Additionally, it tastes wonderful. Most kitchens in many parts of the world, from the middle-ages onward, would almost always have bread, milk, and eggs on hand. Almost as soon as risen bread was invented, cooks began looking for ways to make fresh bread last longer. French toast is a utilitarian way to repurpose stale bread, while transforming it into a delicious and hearty meal. Soaking the dry bread in milk and eggs completely transforms it, filling the nooks and crannies of each slice with a custard-like element adding flavor, texture, and protein. Frying the bread, especially in butter, adds another layer of flavor, texture, and calories required for a long day of labor. The medieval and perennial favorite seasonings, cinnamon and sugar, could have been added to the milk and egg mixture to further elevate the level of taste and sophistication.[9] The toasty bits of bread then could be topped by more sweets including honey, sugar, fresh fruit, jams, jellies, preserves, and later maple syrup, if the cook so desired and had the option. The combination of these flavors was and is delightful, and more importantly, within the

[8] Claiborne, *Craig Claiborne's New York Times Food Encyclopedia*, 178.
[9] Anne Willan, *The Cookbook Library* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 228.

grasp of many common people to enjoy. It is also an extremely satisfying dish that leaves all who partake in it feeling full, undoubtedly due to the high levels of sugar and carbohydrates.

Bread continued to play an important role in the diets of Europeans, as well as other cultures. When Europeans began making their way to the New World, they brought their traditional and ethnic culinary traditions with them.[10] Although Native American foods would play a small role in the diets of American colonists as a means of survival, bread remained an important element in the diet of the Americas. Upon arrival, colonists immediately began planting grains in order to meet the usual demand for bread, and what they could not produce they imported from England. Although they inhabited a new world, American colonists faced the same challenges in regard to food production that had presented in the old world.

Bread, although prized, would continue to require a great deal of labor as the means of production remained virtually unchanged for hundreds of years. Originally, the only mills available in the colonies were built near streams or rivers and produced large quantities of milled flour that could be shipped to colonial cities farther away. What was known as “hard” wheat was used for bread baking, while “soft” wheat was finer and used for making pastry. These early gristmills were highly inefficient and the flour they produced from hard wheat was generally coarse, brown, and dirty resulting in bread baked with a hard and thick crust.[11] Another difficult characteristic of milled wheat from this period was the fact that it contained oil from the wheat germ and spoiled

[10] Willan, *The Cookbook Library*, 228.
[11] Andrew F. Smith, *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 6.

quickly, prohibiting colonists from having any large quantities of wheat milled at one time. After 1790, new technology began to emerge which would expand milling, lower the cost of milled wheat, and make the process more efficient.[12]

Wealthy colonists imitated British fads from the inception of the new republic and by the mid-eighteenth century keeping a "fine table" was a well-established American ideal for all levels of society.[13] Several popular British cookbooks were printed in America and others were imported from Europe, however in 1796 the very first American cookbook was published in Hartford, Connecticut entitled *American Cookery* by Amelia Simmons.[14] Early Americans continued to face the challenge of establishing a new culture while clinging to their old traditions and bread, in any form, became a definitive part of "American" breakfast.

After the American Civil War, flour milling technology had improved to such a level that the flour produced was less expensive. The new mills employed steel rollers and steam, which could break down hard wheat much more efficiently, removing the bran, germ, and oil. It was during this period that millers first began bleaching the wheat flour in order to appeal to grocers and customers seeking a fine, white flour, which also had longer shelf life.[15] The newly refined flour, while visually appealing, lacked the fiber and nutrients traditionally found in whole- wheat bread. Ultimately, commercial bakers would resort to adding sugar to their dough to make up for the lack of flavor and texture

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[12] Smith, *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine,* 6.
[13] Willan, *The Cookbook Library*, 228.
[14] Willan, *The Cookbook Library*, 228.
[15] Smith, *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine,* 9.

in the flour and the resulting baked bread would become sweeter and fluffier.[16] What would come to be known as "baker's bread," became a distinctive and uniform product due to the fact that the new refined flour created consistency.

The popularity of informational books on the instruction of housekeeping and cookery continued to grow in the new nation. One of the more substantial and enduring examples of this trend is the *White House Cookbook*, which was originally published in 1887 and was billed as a "comprehensive cyclopedia of information for the home." In subsequent publications it was the most widely sold cookbook in America. The publishers claimed that they believed this rather large collection of recipes and household tips "fully represented the progress and present perfection of the culinary art than any previous work."[17] It was intended as a reference guide to housekeepers of all classes, with the innovative features of "tried and tested recipes that could be relied upon as the best of their kind," sample menus from State dinners, tips on hospitality, as well as a flexible binding designed to keep the book open while being used in the kitchen. This stylized reference also included a recipe for "American toast" which reads, "To one egg thoroughly beaten, put one cup of sweet milk, and a little salt. Slice light bread and dip into the mixture, allowing each slice to absorb some of the milk: then brown on a hot, buttered griddle . . . spread with butter and serve hot."[18]

Contrarily and interestingly enough, a cookbook entitled, *Good-Living: A Practical Cookery-Book for Town and Country,* by a Miss Sara Van Buren originally published in 1890 lends to its readers a very similar recipe referred to as "Queen Elizabeth's Toast."

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[16] Smith, *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine,* 9.
[17] F.L. Gillette and Hugo Ziemann, *The White House Cook Book* (Chicago: Werner Company, 1887), 1.
[18] Gillette and Ziemann, *The White House Cook Book*, 246.

This recipe calls for the same basic ingredients and preparation as “American Toast,” with the addition of rum or liqueur and powdered sugar. This turn-of-the-century cookery book also refers to a recipe for “Spanish Toast” or “*torrijas*” which is basically bread prepared in the same fashion and deep fried:

> *1 pint of milk* *1 egg* *1 gill of rum or liqueur*
>
> *Powdered cinnamon or nutmeg* *powdered sugar* *lard for frying*
>
> *Beat the egg into the milk, mix and sweeten to taste, cut strips of stale bread as thick as your finger and twice as broad, and 5 inches long. Having removed the crusts, dip the bread first into the sweetened milk, then into the rum. Drain. Have ready, in a frying-pan, deep boiling lard. When certain it is boiling lay in the bread. Fry golden-brown. Remove with a skimmer to brown paper in the oven. When dry, place on a hot dish, 2 and 2 on right angles. Sift powdered sugar and cinnamon over them and serve with custard sauce flavored with rum*.[19]

Although this Spanish toast is very similar to French toast, it is also interesting to note that the flavors of the fried bread, topped with sugar, and dipped into custard are very reminiscent of the “*churro*” which presumably originated in Spain as a street vendor’s food. (This sweet treat can be found today all over America.) One can ascertain from these New World cookbooks that the simple recipe from Apicius remained largely intact well into the nineteenth century and continued to be consumed by Americans of all classes.

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[19] Sara Van Buren, *Good-Living: A Practical Cookery-Book for Town and Country* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1890), 482.

By the end of the nineteenth century, America had become industrialized and in similar fashion to the industrialization that had previously occurred in Europe, millions left farms for cities to work in factories. The Industrial Era, as it would come to be known, would coincide with a mass migration from Europe to America and immigrants would continue to bring their traditional ethnic recipes and breads with them. Yeast bread had become the staple of the working class in America, and the varieties available were as large in number as the different ethnicities who consumed them: homemade wheat or sourdough, puffy white American bakery loaves, crusty Italian, rye, pumpernickel, black bread from Eastern European bakeries, and bagels or bialys from Jewish shops, among others.[20] According to food historian Katherine Turner, bread was consumed at every meal and was sometimes a meal in itself served with milk or tea for the working class citizens of the United States at the turn of the century.

Another key event in this time period was the growth and expansion of the railroad system, which would span 163,000 miles across the United States by 1890. This lead to major changes in the way food products were shipped and sold and impacted the diets of the populous tremendously.[21] Milk became more common as a drink during this period as "milk trains" brought fresh, refrigerated, dairy milk into cities at a much faster rate after the 1880s.[22] Prior to this, the milk available in many cities was less than desirable for its taste and quality. The trains made dairy fresh milk less expensive and pasteurization made it much healthier to consume as well.[23]

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[20] Katherine Leonard Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2014), 4.

[21] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century*, 7.

[22] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century,* 5.

[23] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century,* 5.

Refrigeration would also make cheese and butter more widely available throughout the year, although butter was still an expensive item for most working class families at this time.[24] Many working class families kept egg producing chickens when and where their living quarters allowed. The eggs from chickens could potentially supplement both the diets and incomes of these struggling families.

The "Progressive Movement" from this time period initiated many efforts in social reform, chief among those were efforts to improve poverty and home cooking methods.[25] A slew of home economics and housekeeping publications would proliferate from this era in America, with the goal of instructing women on the very best methods of cooking and keeping house. Working class citizens had to combine what they liked to eat with practicality, and there became much consternation over how these meals were prepared.[26] As in previous time periods, women of the house and cooks would be encouraged to utilize every bit of food in the most economical ways, while providing sanitary, appealing, and nutritious meals. For working class Americans, who regularly spend over half of their total income on food, consuming every bit of it was absolutely obligatory for survival.

This idea would lend itself well to the persistence of go-to recipes such as "French toast" and such recipes continued to be found in several books from the subsequent era with titles such as, *What Shall We Have to Eat?The Question Answered* (1893), *Leftovers Made Palatable: How to Cook Odds and Ends of Food into Appetizing Dishes* (1901), and *Left-over Foods and How to Use Them* (1910). The recipes listed in

[24] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century,* 5.
[25] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century,* 7.
[26] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century*, 6.

these titles for “French toast,” “German toast,” and “Fried bread” are all quite similar, with the same key ingredients that most American households kept on hand: stale bread, milk or cream, and eggs. French toast will continue to persist due to its economical nature and use of staple goods.

It is also around this period that women’s magazines would come into vogue with periodicals such as *Good Housekeeping* and others dedicated to the instruction of women on the best recipes and the latest technology in home economics. *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Betty Crocker* would each establish themselves as must-have cookbooks for the most modern housekeeper, whose yearly publications included ideas for meal planning as well as the latest and greatest recipes, and new takes on classics. French toast recipes reappear in these sources year after year establishing a solid place for it in American cuisine.

The work of the Progressives encouraged home-cooking and diligent housekeeping, which many middle class women aspired to. However, the outlook was much more bleak for the working class. Working class families had begun replacing home cooking, at least in part, with pre-cooked food items early on out of necessity. Large numbers of factory workers consumed ready-made food found at bakeries, saloons, lunchrooms, delicatessens, and pushcarts since the earliest days of the Industrial Revolution. Convenience drove this phenomenon as buying ready-to-eat foods would relieve workers of the time and labor involved in cooking. Bakery items were the most popular choice of pre-cooked foods for the working class at this time and a stigma relating to buying bread as opposed to baking it would arise.

Cultural expectations have always largely dictated what and how people eat. Historically, the culture of the working class in America has required that they spent long hours working in factories or mills and thus had less time to spend at home preparing food. Buying bread provided an easy meal that could be available to children or other family members, while relieving working mothers from the lengthy and laborious process of baking bread at home. While many rural Americans would continue to bake bread at home, most urban families depended on baker's bread as a staple, especially those of lower economic classes. While the Progressives of the time often equated home-cooking with morality, and buying bread instead of baking it was the considered the height of indolence at one point, they often overlooked the fact that many working class kitchens were small and lacked sufficient cook space to take on large tasks such as baking.[27]

While buying bread was slightly more expensive than making it at home, the cost-benefit ratio was clearly worth the added expense to women who were short on time and energy, as well as money to feed their families. After taking into consideration the high cost of fuel required for long baking times the cost of baker's bread seems more reasonable. Due to limited resources, the preservation of bread and strategies to avoid waste proliferated. Utilizing every last bit of precious bread is at the core of recipes such as French toast. It requires minimal ingredients that are on hand and are inexpensive, and the preparation is quick and easy for even the most inexperienced cook. Besides the basic ingredients the only equipment needed is a frying pan or a hot griddle. Furthermore, while the dish is easy to prepare, it tastes amazingly good.

[27] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century*, 61.

French toast is an excellent example of the ingenious ways in which women have always fashioned meals out what they have available to them.

The history of breakfast, or any structured meal, is difficult to pinpoint. However, there is consensus that prior to the Industrial Revolution all meals that were consumed by most people were informal, and could even be described as haphazard.[28] Historically speaking, breakfast, as a meal, has always differed from lunch and dinner for several reasons: breakfast has always been consumed early in the morning, breakfasts have traditionally been unplanned, and breakfasts have traditionally included food left-over from other meals.[29] This distinguishes the first meal of the day from those that occur later in the day, with more time to plan, cook, and serve. At many times and in many places throughout history, much work and toil would have been required before even getting around to breakfast, however in modern times most people wake up and can choose to eat breakfast before performing any chores or work at all. Most people are familiar with the whole idea of the first meal of the day as a way to "break a fast," hence the name. However, it may be surprising to some just how close to old traditions our modern breakfasts continue to be. For example, the idea of a quick bite to eat for breakfast has existed, basically forever. From Neolithic times forward, with the exception of the elite, no one in average households has had time to perform full on cooking methods for breakfast. Hence the emergence of "breakfast" foods that were

[28] Abigail Carroll, *Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), xiv.

[29] Andrew Dalby, *The Breakfast Book* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 15-21.

quick and practical, many of which are still popular: pan fried bacon or other cured meat, porridge, toasted or fried bread, fried eggs.[30]

At some point around the turn of the century, the "traditional" American breakfast will emerge as a large meal that is high in calories. Originally it consisted mainly of some sort of bread and any sort of meat, and soon eggs were added to the list. As mentioned, food leftover from the previous day has historically been common breakfast fare, and was so in America. Many working Americans took their breakfast enroute to work early in the morning, and thus ate whatever was portable. As mentioned, bakery sweet cakes and pies which were cheap, easy to carry, and tasty became a viable breakfast option for city dwellers. Whether knowingly or not, these sweet treats provided those who ate them with a large number of calories at a low cost. This "habit," considered bad by some, may have established American's penchant for sweets as part of the breakfast meal. Upper class Americans would continue the English tradition of breakfast consisting of a complete meal, which differed from the Mediterranean tradition of a light "Continental breakfast."[31] Americans would eventually regularly consume eggs, potatoes, breakfast meats (bacon, sausage, ham) and of course the ubiquitous serving of bread for breakfast. It was believed by some that more calories should be consumed at breakfast, including fat and sugar, in order to provide plenty of energy for the day. However, breakfast cereals would emerge as healthier alternative to the high calorie intake of these meals.

[30] Dalby, *The Breakfast Book*, 27.
[31] Dalby, *The Breakfast Book*, 14.

Post World War II America will see a huge resurgence of and reliance upon pre-made foods. Unlike the canned and pre-packaged foods of the past, new brand names such as Pillsbury and Duncan Hines will provide pre-cooked food items with a shiny new package and image.[32] Middle class and working women alike will come to embrace the "help" in the kitchen provided largely by fictional marketing characters and these packaged foods will become acceptable options in the kitchen. However, as a way to re-affirm the viability and skill level of the family cook many women will attempt to "cook from scratch," even when the labor involved has been greatly reduced by technology. Making a "home-cooked meal" such as French toast, albeit out of store bought bread, would be an excellent example of creating a meal that demonstrates just enough preparation and cooking required to illustrate the skills of the women required to cook, and demonstrate their love of family.

Although most modern Americans could not and cannot afford the time to sit down to a big breakfast every day, the traditional high volume breakfast has continued in popularity. Sweet sides will eventually become a requisite part of the spread, which eventually becomes an indulgent meal eaten more frequently on the weekends. Items that were at one time considered foreign to America such as pancakes, waffles, crepes, and French toast would take their rightful place in the American smorgasbord of breakfast foods. Many Americans will reward themselves with decadent weekend breakfasts after a long work week. A quaint cookbook published in 1971 entitled, *Sunday Breakfast: A Cookbook for Men*, features the comment by the author that

[32] Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 88.

Sunday breakfast has been his family tradition for 15 years. This speaks to the popularity of the American middle-class tradition of taking the weekend off for pure enjoyment. The recipe for "French Toast by Papa" is classic, with a note that, "Most children are fond of French toast, it is easy to prepare and a great way to use up slightly stale bread." The author also mentions that it should be served hot (a continuing directive from the earliest of recipes), and can be topped with syrup and butter, powdered sugar, cinnamon and sugar, or jam.[33]

Many, if not all, American "bed and breakfasts" will come to specialize in classic, decadent, and filling breakfasts dishes, including French toast made to compliment a cozy weekend away. A niche market develops to accommodate weekenders and the yummy and indulgent breakfasts required to complement their stay. Another American food trend that will emerge is local sourcing of food and ingredients. This trend develops as a backlash, in the second half of the twentieth century, to the widespread shipping and broad commercialization of food products which was once heralded as a way to provide people across the country with fresh meat, dairy, and produce. Locally sourced food evidently tastes better, is better for the environment and, it is assumed will sustain local economies.

Taking old, or classic, recipes and providing them with a facelift by using locally sourced ingredients becomes a great marketing tool and a great way to showcase local resources. A recipe for "Trou Pain Perdu," derived from a dish originally served in a small cottage on the shores of Lake Memphremagog, Vermont and prepared with local

[33] Craig Michaels, *Sunday Breakfast: A Cookbook for Men* (Concord: Nitty Gritty Productions, 1971), 91.

milk, local butter, and garden-fresh fruit, is a great example of this trend and demonstrates the continuity of the basic recipe:

1 baguette sliced into 1-inch slices *1 ½ cups fresh milk* *4 fresh eggs*

¼ cup orange juice *¼ cup sugar* *Pinch salt*

1 tbsp. vanilla extract *2 tbsp. Grand Marnier* *Butter for sautéing*

Wisk together all ingredients until blended and pour over the bread, which has been placed into a pan in a single layer, coat the slices thoroughly, heat the butter in a large skillet, add the bread and cook until golden brown.[34]

Modern American chefs and restaurateurs will eventually take French toast to another culinary level. The consumer driven culture and the prosperous latter half of the twentieth century will afford the vast majority of Americans the luxury of having plenty of food to eat. White bread has been pre-sliced, packaged, and sold cheaply enough for virtually every American to access, without any labor involved in its consumption, except that of earning money for groceries. Sliced bread is available to every American family, at a reasonable cost. Although some will continue the tradition to maintain frugality in cooking, there is also a trend toward decadence.

The once quite simple and, surprisingly, still widely consumed French toast will become refashioned to reflect the affluent culture in America in contrast to the stale bread economy of the dish's past. Modern American recipes include those that call for stuffing the toast with cream cheese, custards, and various fruit concoctions before

[34] Margaret S. Fox and John B. Bear, *Morning Food from Cafe Beaujolais* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1990), 87.

coating in egg and cream and cooking in butter. The list of appropriate toppings for this classic dish will continue to grow to include things like chocolate, nuts, whip cream, and essentially anything sweet. Moreover, French toast will be prepared more and more often with savory additions such as goat cheese, chives, thyme, dill, mushrooms, and of course the obligatory butter, especially in upscale restaurants.[35] The nature of the dish, which is to say the basic and fundamental goodness of bread, is what lends itself to the continual re-invention of French toast dishes. It is the most significant reason that humans continue to enjoy this dish. With every new recipe, the key elements of bread, eggs & cream, consistently appear linking the dish to its interminable past.

For much of history, and in most places around the globe, cuisine was been dictated by what previous generations ate. Dining preferences, eating habits, and taste are a complex matter made more complicated by the microcosms of American culture. Circumstances that have limited food choice in the past have included the availability of food items in a certain area, time and labor involved in cooking and preparing the food, necessary equipment for preparing food, and knowledge of appropriate recipes and cooking methods.[36] Material constraints have always outweighed want for certain foods, and those with limited resources have had to choose their meals with even more care. That is to say that poor people throughout history have been forced to eat what they have, or what they can afford to buy with their precious little money. They have

[35] Margaret S. Fox and John B. Bear, *Morning Food: Breakfasts, Brunches & More for Savoring the Best Part of the Day* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2006), 72.

[36] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century*, 6.

also been forced to eat what they have time to prepare, while simultaneously working to earn money to survive.[37]

Although cultural forces and material constraints will always exist to some degree, the world in which we live today has many more options regarding food choice. Contemporary Americans are not required to eat what their parents ate. The American diet has been transformed by a uniquely American culture that is constantly open to change. However, there is a sense of restlessness in a world with so many options of what, when, and how to eat and endless choices regarding food. Traditional foods, such as those eaten in childhood or those found on Grandma's Thanksgiving table, can provide a sense of tradition and place.[38]

From a historical standpoint, the functionality of French toast is immense. It is a genius way to utilize things on hand, while creating a delightful dish. The idea of "whipping" up a tasty breakfast has existed since the beginning of time. The incorporation of eggs and cream with any variety of bread quick fried on a griddle and topped with any number of sweet toppings (or not, depending on preference) is a pleasing alternative to almost anything else one could consume for breakfast. Creating a hot-meal out of almost nothing, and in almost no time, has been the challenge of cooks and mothers for generations. The fact that French toast continues to be served as a suitable breakfast dish is a testament to its high quality and exquisite taste. Although the world is constantly changing, the desire to create delicious meals that are easily accessible is something that will never change.

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[37] Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century*, 7.

[38] Richard Pillsbury, *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 140.

Many modern Americans find themselves lingering over lazy weekend breakfasts, where in which relaxation is one of the main ingredients to any dish. This requirement lends itself well to the utilitarian dish that is French toast. And so the story of the long history of the dish known as “French toast” goes. From humble beginnings it has successfully withstood the test of time, over tremendous cultural changes, and has emerged not only intact, but more importantly, greatly appreciated for its taste. The reason for this miraculous story of survival is as uncomplicated as a traditional recipe for French toast. The requirements are simple and easy to come-by, the dish is quick, easy, and extremely satisfying, and French toast is ultimately delicious. It could be argued that the modern day French toast is essentially the same as the “sweet dish” prepared and served in Classical Rome.

The United States is a land of immigrants, and by the opinions of some, American traditions are an accumulation of those gathered from different nationalities. American food is largely an amalgam of ethnic traditions that have been brought to these shores from around the globe and adapted, just as the people have. Over the last two hundred plus years, a unique American cuisine has developed. And although modern Americans have enumerable options as to what they will consume, many continually eat traditional dishes and recipes. The most distinctive quality of American food is the idea of refashioning something old into something new and truly American. French toast, with its basic underpinnings, lends itself well to this concept of Americanization. Bread provides what is essentially a blank canvass on which any number of tasty ingredients can be strewn, to the delight of those consuming them. For instance, flambéed bananas, Nutella, guava stuffed, pecan crusted, strawberry-rhubarb

flavored, ginger and vanilla, and a host of other ingredients are included in a list of the best French toast found in New York City.

Perhaps the reason breakfast food is so comforting is because, as humans, we return to the same foods over and over. It is possible that the foods we have been eating the longest, bring us the most satisfaction. Consider freshly baked bread, a quality cheese, or wine for that matter. Have these early foods begin to permeate our DNA so that when they are consumed the feeling is more than good taste, but more like intense satisfaction? Or is it more likely that humans naturally like what they know? The cozy breakfast foods that one is raised on will always illicit happy feelings whenever they are eaten. For many people, French toast transcends a childhood treat and continues to be enjoyed well into adulthood. It can be made with any kind of bread; French baguettes, brioche, wheat, white, raisin bread, or whatever is on hand lending the dish an individualized air even in its most basic form depending on how one grew up making it.

Modern American breakfast has become a weekend indulgence because of the cultural forces that drive most Americans to work Monday through Friday. Our capitalistic society has forced the vast majority to conform to a daily grind that does not accommodate large meals throughout the day. The shift in productivity during the early Industrial Age forced a major cultural change in the consumption of dinner over one hundred years ago. Today, we have seen the near elimination of breakfast, due to early start times for school and work. Most adults and children alike, are lucky to get a cold bowl of cereal or a pop-tart before they are off to a full day of productivity in this day and age.

Because of these cultural forces, Americans have largely taken the weekend to indulge in larger and more appealing breakfasts. Breakfast is now relished because it happens less frequently. Many people associate warm breakfast with happy times, and Mom. A large breakfast, and the foods served therein, reminds people that care has been taken to prepare the meal. A large breakfast makes one feel pampered and loved. Although the ingredients may be common, time and effort are required to prepare a big, hearty breakfast. People appreciate that time and effort, and thus appreciate breakfast.

Breakfast appeals not only to taste and the basic need to fulfill hunger, but to all the senses. The aroma of French toast, especially when it is seasoned with cinnamon, is unmistakable and can bring a flood of childhood memories rushing back if it was made and eaten regularly throughout childhood. Although each person has their own idea of the ideal breakfast, it would be hard to find a person, a country, or a culture that does not embrace the dish known in America as “French toast." It is universally pleasing to the senses and its endurance and longevity through history has proven that.

Bibliography

Ballerini, Luigi, ed. *The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book Composed by the Eminent Maestro Martino of Como.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

This is a fairly recent translation of the medieval cookbook presumably authored by Martino of Como. He is often referred to as one of the world's earliest "foodies" because he is adamant about his unique culinary preferences even at this early point in food history. The recipe for "suppe dorate is one of two early relics included for French toast.

Burr, Mrs. Clarence. *What Shall We Have to Eat? The Question Answered.* South Framingham: Lavekview Press, 1893.

This is one of many home-economic and American cookery themed books from the Progressive Era. Hathitrust has an excellent collection of these rare and interesting books that really provide a unique look at what women were talking about and reading about during this period. I was excited each time a found another recipe for French toast in each of these types of publications.

Carroll, Abigail. *Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal.* New York: Basic Books, 2013.

Carroll does an excellent job of outlining a thesis about how meals in American cuisine are constructed and why. Although the main focus of the book is not breakfast, or French toast, she does discuss both topics.

Claiborne, Craig. *Craig Claiborne's New York Times Food Encyclopedia.* New York: Random House, 1994.

This publication is designed for a general audience as opposed to a more scholarly source, and contains a large array of extremely interesting food topics.

Dalby, Andrew. *The Breakfast Book.* London: Reaktion Books, 2013.

I really enjoyed reading this book and ended up reading it cover to cover by the time my research was complete. Dalby notes that there is no comprehensive book before his dedicated solely to breakfast, which is surprising. He examines the history of the meal and makes some great arguments for his ideas.

Fox, Margaret S. and John B. Bear. *Morning Food: Breakfasts, Brunches & More for Savoring the Best Part of the Day.* Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2006.

----------. *Morning Food from Cafe Beaujolais.* Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1990.

Apparently Margaret Fox owns a renowned restaurant in Mendocino, California and she has published numerous books regarding food, recipes, and breakfasts. The recipes are unique and the accompanying writing is charming and engaging in these lovely books.

Gerrard, L.M. *The "Newlywed" Menu Suggestions.* Philadelphia: Menu Publishing, 1914.

Another Hathitrust find that exemplifies the pressing issues that existed for women in 1914 American culture, which includes making French toast.

Gillette, F.L. and Hugo Ziemann. *The White House Cook Book.* Chicago: Werner Company, 1887.

This is such a fun cookbook to look at. I was fortunate enough to come across several early copies and the lithographic photos of the first ladies in the books are quite astounding. Apparently, the original book was published by a woman from South Dakota who had a great idea to market a cookbook after what was served at the White House. After the success of the original, Hugo Ziemann stepped in to add some legitimacy to the project, as he had actually worked there and was able to add some behind the scenes information.

Michaels, Craig. *Sunday Breakfast: A Cookbook for Men.* Concord: Nitty Gritty Productions, 1971.

This is a charming and delightful little publication that I came across, which was written for men. It is interesting because when it was published in 1971, cooking was clearly still considered mainly the realm of women. This book attempts to make it ok for men to attempt simple recipes including French toast.

Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. "French toast." Oxford University Press, 2014.

I love to examine the history of words and I was researching French toast, it occurred to me that there may be a clue to its origins in the Oxford English Dictionary. While the exact history of the dish remains a mystery, I did gather some relevant information.

Pillsbury, Richard. *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.

Pillsbury has written a really interesting book in which he discusses at length the history of what he calls American foodways. He examines what we eat and tries to answer why we eat what we do in this country.

Shapiro, Laura. *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

This is quite an entertaining book for me because I love to read about women. Shapiro attempts to shed light on the broad forces that have placed women squarely in the kitchen and discuss what has gone on since they've been there. She is a witty writer who has some relevant ideas about the history of food and cooking.

Smith, Andrew F. *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

As discussed in class, Smith's collection of the 30 most important innovations in food in American history is extremely well written. I chose to include some information about the milling of wheat in early America, as it pertains to bread.

Turner, Katherine Leonard. *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century.* Berkely: University of California Press, 2014.

This was one of my favorite books from this semester. I was surprised to find that I was able to use so many of the required texts for the class, however the history of French toast is really a common food history. Turner sheds light on the issue of bread consumption by the working class.

Van Buren, Sara. *Good-Living: A Practical Cookery-Book for Town and Country.* New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1890.

This was a really great and unique find. It was published in New York and is clearly meant for an American audience, however the name of each recipe was also listed in French and I could not really understand why. It was a real contrast to the White House cookbook from the same era.

Vehling, Joseph, trans. *Apicius Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome.* New York: Dover, 1977.

As a lover of Roman history I was very happy to find what is probably the earliest recipe for French toast. The Romans had many great ideas, but who knew that this simple dish would be one of them.

Willan, Anne. *The Cookbook Library.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Willan writes an in-depth and informative book that provides a lot of information about the food, the places, and the people through history in this comprehensive collection.