

We Lean in to Listen

I was hanging out with some friends yesterday, watching a Japanese yaoi rom com when the folds in my brain scrunched up, raisin tight, and produced an image. An image of freshly baked baguettes, steaming hot when cracked open. I had to make them.

Growing up, my mom made a lot of bread. It was the closest thing that we ever got to white bread in my house. She had this hulking bread maker for more than 10 years. It lived on the countertop, shaking it as it worked. It whooped, crying under the strain of kneading the dough; it screamed like our lives are in danger when a loaf was done. She'd extract the loaves from its jaws, hot-potato tapping the underside of the loaves and listening for the hollow ring of a well-baked loaf. I'll go home to Illinois, and there'll be dough churning away in the machine and the hallmark chlorine smell of my mom's bread floating in the air.

Camden, my older brother, got fancy with it though. He's always been *the* baker. When my nana died, he labored over a cast iron press, churning out pizzelle. He spent one of his winter breaks between video games and crafting the perfect cinnamon rolls. Whenever he was home, there was always something delicious around, including baguettes.

Camden was to baguettes as Sisyphus was to the boulder. It was his white whale. In his post-grad, pre-graduate program funk, working in online tutoring, he made those damn baguettes.

The second time he made baguettes, he had already nailed them. But it wasn't good enough for him. He labored and toiled, thrifted and scrounged in search of the platonically ideal baguettes. If my mom's baking is like driving a minivan, Camden's is like designing the car. He

did his work in sterile conditions, no sound except the rhythmic slap of kneading: one, two, rotate. One, two, rotate. With practiced movements, he'd check the gluten development, roll the dough into perfect baguettes, score, and place in the oven. Out they'd come, golden and cracking. Sitting down to make my own baguettes felt like the start of a personal moonshot.

Getting started felt less like cooking and more like becoming a single parent. When working with yeast, I put the weight of their lives on my mind. I've always been more of a cookies and cakes and pies guy, not a grizzled bread maker. It felt like skydiving. I don't know the first thing about how to fold a parachute or what the correct way to fall is or even when to pull my chute. But everyone can jump, so that's what I did.

The recipe simply said: "bloom the yeast". I had set my kettle to boil but was struck with a premonition of my yeast being cooked alive. I spent 10 minutes in a three-way tango with the sink and the kettle. Camden would have prepared the perfect bed for the yeast to rise. Even my mom would have no trouble with her wonderful machine. They got magic while I'm stuck with a wet finger and anxiety about hot water yeast murder.

Camden's ritual was clinical: hydrate, autolyze, fold; it was a hard science. In my hands, it felt like wrestling a swamp creature. The recipe called for a gentle "stretch and fold," a rhythmic "up, over, rotate" that was supposed to build structure. Instead, the dough clung to me with the desperation of a needy toddler. I spent three hours picking dough off my hands, hair, and clothes, trying to mimic Camden's sterile precision in a kitchen that was bordering on condemned. There was no rhythmic slap of kneading here, just the clattering of the bowl and the splattering of dough as I wrestled. It felt like crashing his car.

Shaping them wasn't easy either. Copying Camden's refined rolling techniques fell flat when pushing my "baguettes" through a mountain of flour. They stuck to everything: my hands, the counter, the pan. My roommate Emily walked in on me up to my wrists in a glutinous sludge, bent over the counter and flapping at the faucet handle with my elbows. She kindly turned the sink on, put her earbuds back in, and went back to her omelet without a word.

Pulling the baguettes out of the oven didn't change much. They were pale, and just as lumpy and small -- my hope for any oven spring deflated. But tapping the bottom yielded that clear, hollow sound, like knocking on an expensive door. Despite how thin they got, their crumb was wonderful. Paired with bear-bottle honey and fresh butter, their warmth spread down to my toes. Zach got off the couch and came and devoured a hot baguette with me in a flurry of butter and honey.

Camden did a number on me though: I was possessed by his perfectionist spirit. For 2 weeks after my little turd-baguettes, I filled our apartment up with loaves of bread. I switched to an even easier recipe. No knead, no fold, but just as sticky and gloopy. Dumping the dough onto the pan felt like littering; it slumped into a blob of slime. A delicious, crusty and fluffy blob, but a pile of refuse none the less.

Those loaves emerged from the oven tree-bark dark and slouched on the pan. After enough tapping and dreaming of the crumb, I'd slice them open, steam rising lazily from their exposed guts, and my roommates would come flocking like a group of hungry seagulls. They ignored my protests of "letting it sit for a second" and would rip and tear at it, cutting at it with butter knives. We devolved in those moments, standing around the oven, devouring my fresh, warm bread.

When pulling a loaf out, our glasses would fog, the greediest would burn their fingertips on the bread and swear, and we would laugh at them while stuffing chunks into our mouths anyway. Crumbs dusted the stovetop, our shirts, the floor. We danced around the flour, tracking ghostly footprints on the tile. We hovered around the oven like we were warming ourselves at a fire we didn't know we had been cold without.

One night, Zach pulled out a bespoke Nutella for us. Dan, who is famous for disappearing, threw a movie on TV. Emily cleared the counter, moving pizza boxes and the stack of the previous tenants' mail, making space like it mattered. We didn't talk about it. We just moved around each other; a choreography no one had taught us. The bread crackled as it cooled, a quiet and living sound. We all leaned in to listen, like it was telling us something.

Standing over each new loaf didn't turn us into bakers, but it turned us into a household. Zach started cooking Indian food for us; Emily started brewing beer. But mostly, we just stopped disappearing into our rooms. We sit in the kitchen now. We watch the steam rise.