

A Toast to Toasters Everywhere

By Kirk Wareham

It's 5:00 a.m. in New York.

Sunrise is not a great time to be dancing barefoot in an apartment building entry, waiting for someone to turn off the blasted fire alarm system. The concrete floor is desperately cold. My toes are white and pale, the color of boiled cauliflower, and appear significantly lonely without slippers.

The facts are inescapable: I am to blame.

Again.

This year I made a New Year's resolution to give up burning toast, and for 3 days I was on a serious roll. But here it is January 4th, and my neighbors and I are having yet another impromptu gathering in the entry.

They are not happy, these neighbors. Apologies and protestations of good intent don't cut the mustard with them. I am, in their provincial minds, approximately equivalent to the greenish slime that blankets our ponds here in the northeast in mid July. Even I can understand that. One of the neighbors, a frisky lady in her 70's, was so incensed that she waltzed down the road to tell the local farm animals about it. Arriving at the barnyard, she was attacked by a rooster and was forced to defend herself with a rousing karate kick to the wattle. But in the process, one of her slippers flew off and she was left with no recourse but to tramp barefooted through the barnyard muck to retrieve it. It doesn't pay to lose your composure under duress, and the incident didn't help her disposition.

The plain fact is that my toaster has a mind of his own. Sometimes he does his job quickly and efficiently, and slices of wonderfully browned bread topple out of him just as the coffee pot finishes perking. It's a beautiful thing to see. But on other occasions, just when I think I have him figured out, his nefarious nature gleams wickedly through, and he becomes volatile and hyperactive like a squirrel on steroids. Long before the poached eggs are ready, he has completed his job and is belching fire and brimstone, grinning all the while. Smoke is curling up to the smoke detector before I can spill my coffee on the counter. One of these days, in retribution, I'm going to separate his twisted electrical cord from the rest of his illustrious body, and... but never mind that.

Sometimes it seems that a toaster's goal in life is to reduce a perfectly good slice of whole wheat bread to charcoal. I strongly suspect that there is a symbiotic relationship between the toast and the smoke detector hanging there on the kitchen ceiling. I see them winking and plotting all the days of my life. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, you know, that kind of thing. I'll burn the toast, you yelp and wail, and let's see how fast they can run. Nothing like a little excitement to start the day.

One time, I went looking for my toast and found a burnt offering underneath the grill. When I tried to fish it out with a stainless steel fork, something went POOF! My wife has long advised against poking around inside a toaster with metal implements without first unplugging it, but sometimes the details escape me. I avoided electrocution that time, but I never got an edible piece of toast out of that toaster again.

The premise of a toaster is that electrical current is applied to a small filament conductor made of copper wire which heats up and converts the power ($P=VI$) into heat which browns the

ragged surface of a slice of bread. The timer shuts off the current at the right moment, and the toast pops up. That's the theory, at least.

There are more kinds of toasters in the world than there are yoga positions. There are machines that accommodate English muffins and pudgy bagels, and other models for artisan and sourdough breads. There are two-slice and four-slice models. And these days, with all the "smart" technology around, it can take a whole village to get a finished piece of toast safely out of the machine. Now you can buy models featuring defrost, a touchscreen, instant replay, and although I haven't seen it yet, I feel certain there's a Netflix option lingering out there somewhere.

The worst type of toaster is the horizontal grill with no pop-up feature, and I always always forget them, every time. Terrible design, horrible design, abhorrent design, scandalous design, loathsome design! Congress should digress from their perpetual regress and suppress their ingress, which is another way of saying that one should heave a Molotov cocktail at any such as these.

I suppose that burning things to a crisp has been happening ever since fire was first discovered. I can just imagine Mr Neanderthal squatting beside his campfire with a forked stick, toasting the fresh biscuits that Mrs. Neanderthal so assiduously labored over all morning. Perhaps momentarily distracted while slapping at mosquitoes or driving off obnoxious wolves, the next thing you know he was shaking ashes out of his hair and looking around for something else for dinner.

On the domestic scene, toast can easily become an area of major conflict. It's not like the Yooks and Zooks declaring war over which side of their toast to butter. But in my family, we have those who want their toast buttered right out of the toaster, and others who want their toast buttered after it has cooled, to prevent, I suppose, soggianness. Nobody wants a soggy piece of toast. But I'll take warm and soggy over cold and brittle any day of the month. There are folks, specifically retired English gentlemen, who don't butter their toast until it has languished for 5 minutes on a drying rack in the middle of the table, next to the salt and pepper, so as to acquire a sufficiency of coldness and hardness. By that time, it's about as edible as hollow core spancrete, I can't figure those British people out.

Speaking of the English, they seem to have created a 200-year moratorium on jam. Otherwise, why would they be putting that marmite stuff on their toast? I mean, we are talking halitosis at the major league level!

(Sound of stampeding footsteps, a door slamming shut.)

Sorry about that; I'm back. Just had to step outside for a breath of fresh air. Yeast extract walks softly but carries a big stick, let me tell you. Now I know why the British empire collapsed.

Ecclesiastes chapter 3 has this to say about toasters: "there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: A time to keep and a time to throw away."

Let this be my toast to toasters everywhere.