



by Jess Driscoll

During the plague year of 2020 (I recently learned that a “plague” means bacteria, not virus, so I’m using the metaphorical meaning here, not the scientific), those of us in quarantine have been stretched thin between digital connection and domestic arts. The internet is where the people are, but the kitchen is where I make comfort. For most of the year, I’ve been baking bread.

Perhaps I should have been mixing potions instead.

During the plague years of the 1300s, the people looked everywhere, even their kitchens, for relief. To ward off the Black Death, some used a vinegar solution of herbs and spices. There are certainly medicinal qualities in plants, the Four Thieves Vinegar probably did little more than block the smell of death.

In my cupboards right now, I have sage, cloves, and rosemary. Marjoram and angelica seeds are easy to find at most grocery stores.

As quarantine continues into the winter, I’m on the lookout for interesting recipes.



The General was founded in 2009 by Jess Driscoll and Megan Westerby with an exchange that went something like this:

J: we should open a bakery

M: we should totally open a bakery!

Opening a bakery, it turns out, it really fucking hard to do, especially when you live on either sides of the border.

We started writing the Review instead. Each issue is hyper-focused on a single food noun. Find the archive at:

jessdriscoll.com/thegeneral/

VINAIGRE DES QUATRE VOLEURS

(text from the Museum of Paris, 1937)

Take three pints of strong white wine vinegar, add a handful of each of wormwood, meadowsweet, wild marjoram and sage, fifty cloves, two ounces of campanula roots, two ounces of angelic, rosemary and horehound and three large measures of camphor. Place the mixture in a container for fifteen days, strain and express then bottle. Use by rubbing it on the hands, ears and temples from time to time when approaching a plague victim.

The bright spots of 2020 have been my farmers market Sundays and *The Old Guard*, and the two of them came together, unexpectedly, with this focaccia recipe. *The Old Guard* was released on Netflix on July 10. My friends online started talking about it right away. Suddenly, we had a new fandom, a necessary hyper-fixation that wasn't coronavirus.

There's an Italian character in this movie, from Genoa specifically, the capital of the Ligurian region. So when Megan sent me a recipe for Ligurian focaccia, it was both 2020 bright spots, baked together in a pan.

It seemed my customers at the farmers market liked the whole wheat sourdough loaves I made. It seemed they preferred savoury flavours over the sweet. It seemed to me that a classic rosemary focaccia would be the ideal.

Early on in my farmers market experiment, I decided that the bread I sold would be plain. It would be sourdough, and I would sell dried starter alongside, so the flavour deserved to be the main character. I would also have salt to sell, made with sea water I had collected from one of the many local beaches surrounding White Rock.

To sell the sourdough starter, I would bake sourdough bread. To sell the sea salt, I would bake focaccia.

One market Sunday, a customer stopped to inspect the dinner plate-sized focaccia I was selling, if they were pizza crusts. He explained that focaccia must be thick and held his thumb and index finger apart to show just how thick he meant. I conceded his point, but he didn't buy any loaves.



This recipe uses salt in three ways. It's in the dough, as salt should be in every dough you mix up—sweet or savoury. It's sprinkled on top, as salt should be on almost everything before you bake it. And there's salt in the brine for the dough to soak in as it proves. This is what makes Ligurian focaccia its own thing.

I don't know why focaccia needs to have rosemary on top. But if rosemary is the flower for remembrance, if salt is necessary for life, and if bread stands for hearth and home, then a warm loaf on your table is the comfort we all need at the end of 2020.

★★★★★

by Megan Westerby

My first culinary herbal awakening was around rosemary. I was a precocious teenager who aspired to cook in a fancy way (which really meant a non-American-midwest way). A vaguely European way was the easiest way to feel fancy. The internet was new enough at the time that an illusion of fanciness felt more accessible than it did in cookbooks, even though the recipes were mostly the same. The novel before an online recipe, which also emphasizes the important bits—fresh ingredients, culinary tradition via personal story, recommended substitutions—wasn't a thing yet.

I've frequently crisped up extra rosemary to have a decent amount on hand to sprinkle on anything else that deserves a hint of rosemary—eggs, croutons, baked potatoes, focaccia, cocktails etc.

I know what I want out of rosemary now and that self-knowledge makes me more resilient to cooking failures. Every dish isn't perfect. The method that worked last time might not this time. You eat it and move on. Or you just move on, if it's inedible. That's OK too.

★★★★★

Luckily, that memory is now overlaid with the times I have been able to use rosemary correctly.

I've taken to making a version of an Epicurious recipe: spicy creamy chickpea breakfast.

It starts with a sprig of rosemary crisped in oil. The rosemary comes out before the other ingredients are added but the hint of flavor remains, and the crispy rosemary is chopped up for a finishing touch at the end.

You either knew what was important or you didn't, which is how I made chicken in rosemary cream sauce with dried rosemary and discovered that I didn't like pine needles in my food.

It's so obvious now that making that same recipe with fresh ingredients would've been a simple and delightful meal instead of a mouthful of pointy, crunchy, overwhelming flavor. But at the time it was hard to think of my empirical lesson in dried vs fresh herbs as anything other than an abject cooking failure.

Rosemary's heartiness and smell-sight-taste triple punch has always been appealing to me, but I ruined the practical experience of it for myself by not thinking through what the dried version of it would be like in a fairly fast-cooking sauce. I can still imagine the dried-pine-needle mouthfeel of that early dish, complete with the taste of Costco pre-shredded parmesan. I had a lot to learn. We're all on our own path.

I learned the on-the-nose lesson fast: don't make something if you don't have the right ingredients and can't figure out an appropriate substitution. But there was also a deeper lesson: don't blindly trust a recipe. Evaluate for yourself which pieces are key and which you can work around based on your knowledge and skill.

I learned to visualize an entire recipe before I started cooking it. I learned that if you don't use an ingredient correctly you will (justifiably) not enjoy the taste or texture of it.