

Bunkie Bakes Best

By Paula Anne Greten

Who can resist ... Sleeping late on Saturday morning? ... Waking up to the aroma of freshly baking bread? ... Walking into a warm, sunny kitchen as a smiling Dad slips three golden loaves from the oven? ... Slathering butter on that first steamy slice offered by the master baker himself?

Those were great moments. It was the early 1950s. Our friends took their ham-and-cheese sandwiches to school on Wonder bread, but Dad made ours with his home-made loaves. He called it “nutritious,” a nonsense word to us. We could not understand why we couldn’t have the snow-white, perfectly square “enriched” bread like our friends had. We were envious when they disassembled their sandwiches, “smushed” their bread into a sticky ball and chomped with delight. Dad’s bread was not smushable; we tried.

Back then, TV dinners were new to grocery shelves for families who wanted to eat dinner in the living room in front of a new invention called television. Everyone was looking for ways to spend less time in the kitchen. Everyone except my father.

My father, Richard Herman Greten, was a tall, broad-shouldered German—6 feet 2 inches tall and 200 pounds—with a stern, disciplined demeanor. He exercised regularly, lifted weights and was proud of his good health. He planted a vegetable garden every summer so we could have fresh veggies as often as possible.

“You gotta eat right, Paul,” he’d say too often. Good food made for good health, and Dad made the time to provide it for us.

“Herman the German” was a hardworking guy who looked at life in a serious, analytical way. A German friend once told me that people in his country don’t smile much, and that described Dad. He wasn’t sad, just conscientious about everything he did—purposeful.

He had studied hard to become a mechanical

engineer and was precise about measurements and details of all kinds. His entire way of life revolved around achievement, comprising lists of projects to be done at work and at home. He worked through each project from start to finish, then checked it off the list. His at-home projects were his way of having fun, but they looked like work to us kids, especially when he recruited us to assist.

Every now and then, though, this dour man would make a joke, taking us by surprise. He’d mention that the secretaries at his office could not resist him, and then he’d flex his biceps, his eyes flashing mischief. A minute later, he’d be serious. He showed his “soft center” when he pleased, but only on rare occasions. He thought it was funnier that way, and it was.

I’m not saying that Dad had no temper. He had no qualms about raising his voice when he got steamed. But when this towering fellow baked his bread, he smiled. It was his true bliss. I don’t know how he got interested in baking bread. He grew up in a family of three sons. Perhaps his disciplined, autocratic mother taught her boys domestic self-sufficiency. But Dad made baking into a scientific endeavor and completed it perfectly, from start to finish.

Every other Saturday, “Ol’ Bunkie,” as Mom called him, rose at 5:30 a.m. to bake six loaves before breakfast. Then, during the week, when a new loaf was needed, he’d take one from the freezer, cut even slices with his “kitchen saw,” and make lunches for us to take to school. He timed it precisely so that by lunchtime, the bread would “arrive at room temp” when the Greten kids unwrapped the freshest sandwiches in the lunchroom. We were eating gourmet sandwiches on luxury bread, and we were not impressed.

Luckily for us, Dad took our ignorance and criticism in stride and baked his bread anyway. Soon he branched out, adding wheat germ to his loaves before most Americans knew about its dietary value. The next year, he perfected his sourdough.

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As word spread, Dad began to give a loaf to a friend or neighbor when he had surplus. One year, a neighbor with an offset printer made customized bread bags as a surprise gift. Each brown paper bag was the size of a Greten loaf and was imprinted: “BUNKIE’S BAKERY: ‘Bunkie Bakes Best.’” Dad said that was the best compliment he ever received. It’s been more than 50 years since those memories were born. And it’s been 12 years since Ol’ Richard Herman left this earth to bake heavenly bread.

In 1969, when I finished college and rented my first apartment, I mentioned to Dad in a phone call from Ohio to New Jersey that I was thinking of making some bread—sometime. Two days later, I received a letter containing Bunkie’s bread recipe, written and mailed just hours after our long-distance conversation. Dad had written down every detail—before I could object. I wouldn’t have.

From my very first three-loaf batch, I baked wholesome and delicious bread, sharing the odd loaf with a friend or neighbor who returned an appreciative smile.

Here’s that 1969 letter from my Dad. As you read it, you may detect healthy dollops of joy and satisfaction lurking between the lines.

January 23, 1969

Dear Paula,

It was good to get your letter yesterday, so I am seizing the opportunity to answer this during lunch period. I’m pleased that you are twisting my arm to tell you how to make bread. Here goes—guarantee it cannot fail.

Fleishmann’s yeast is now made for dry mixing—it is more finely divided (powdered), does not have to be dissolved in water before using. Use unbleached flour (Heckers, or it may be branded Ceresota where you are).

Mix together (dry ingredients). Mix fairly well with spoon.

3 cups flour (does not require sifting)

3 tablespoons sugar

2 teaspoons salt

2 packages of Fleishmann’s yeast

Scald 1 cup milk, add 3 tablespoons margarine or butter (to soften and melt). Add 1 cup water

to hasten reduction of temperature to about 110 degrees. Can you judge this or have you a roast meat thermometer to help judge (or other thermometer)?

Add milk, water, shortening to dry ingredients and beat until smooth. Add about 2 (little less) cups more flour and mix together.

This should produce a sticky glob, which you turn out onto a floured tabletop or board and knead, adding flour as necessary to result in a ball which will hold its shape. Total amount of flour used should approximate 5½ cups, but you can’t do it by measuring—only by feeling the kneaded ball. Knead about 5 minutes.

Place in a greased bowl, cover with a moist towel and set in a warm place to raise (rise) until double in bulk (approx. 1½ hrs). I light the oven for 1 minute and *turn it out*. The space then stays at about 80–85 degrees while raising. In other words, I let it raise with the bowl in the oven.

When double in bulk, punch it down with your fist to drive out the gas. Re-cover bowl and grease two pans fairly well (heavy). Divide the dough into 2 parts and knead ½ to 1 minute to compact it.

Then form loaves by rolling into shape. Put into pan pressing against the greased bottom, then turn over to present greased surface to top so that it doesn’t dry out while raising in pan to about double in bulk.

Again light the oven for a minute and turn it out. Again use oven as a warm place to allow the loaves to raise (about 25 minutes). Then just light the oven (without disturbing the loaves) at 360°. Stand back and pray.

Look at it after about 45 minutes and from there on, just judge brownness.

In case you do not know what kneading is, it is the folding, pressing out with heel of your hands, turn 90 degrees, fold, press out, etc., until dough gets stretchy.

Remove from pans immediately to cool—out of drafts. Wrap in freezer paper.

Mother is sending your blouse today. I hope.

Mother and I are attending a four-session investment course at Allied Chem. Then I’ll know what to do with my money.

Don’t worry about the secretaries. I just can’t help what I do to them—

Write again soon. I’ll answer. Running out of space—Love, Dad ❖