



Use your loaf

Bread often gets a bad press, but the growing interest in unadulterated varieties will hopefully ensure that it maintains its place as part of a healthy diet

Whether it's a British sandwich loaf, German rye, Italian focaccia, Indian chapati or any other of its incarnations, bread has been a staple of the human diet across many different cultures for thousands of years. Recently, however, it's developed a poor reputation in some dietary circles. It's true that not all breads are created equal in terms of their potential health benefits, but there's a worldwide artisan baking movement that's championing 'real bread' – that is, bread made using simple ingredients and traditional methods, without the additives found in most factory-made, long-life loaves.

Choosing the right bread for your needs offers a range of health benefits, including calming a sensitive stomach or providing a fibre- and complex-carbohydrate-rich meal on the go. Even those with gluten allergies and intolerances can enjoy gluten-free options made with flours such as rice and potato. And when it comes to bread, 'enjoy' really is the word, as there's nothing like the pleasure of slicing a warm loaf, fresh from the oven. Indeed, the phrase 'breaking bread' is usually understood to mean engaging in a comfortable, friendly interaction with others. Its more literal meaning comes from a time when sharing simple foods was a way of building trust and alliances, and the expression is thought to have originated from biblical descriptions of Jesus sharing bread with his disciples.

Simple starter

The simplest bread recipes use just three or four ingredients – flour, water, salt and potentially yeast. UK project the Real Bread Campaign defines real bread as that which is made without chemical raising agents, processing aids or any other additives, and it supports bakers who use time-honoured traditional methods. This encompasses breads from across the globe – from bagels to bara brith, stotties to Staffordshire oatcakes, ciabatta to chleb and many more – and may or may not involve a sourdough starter. It can also include natural ingredients such as seeds and nuts, milk and cheese, herbs, oils, fats and dried fruits. Other additives that campaigners for real





PHOTOGRAPHS: EWA ŁUGOWSKA

bread will avoid include ascorbic acid, xanthan gum and anti-staling or dough-improving enzymes. The key, according to nutritionist Francine Ganansia-Joyce, is to avoid bread labelled with ingredients that you don't recognise or understand. She says: 'The longer the list of ingredients, the less good for you the bread will be. When you look at the back of a packet and see flour, water and salt, you know what those things are. Avoid lots of additives with complicated names.' Taking the time to look for unprocessed bread can also be a way of supporting local artisan bakers, millers and farmers.

Pleasure and health

Francine, who runs her business, DietConsulting, in London, but grew up near Grenoble in the French Alps, says that 'for the French people, bread is a religion'. She explains: 'In France you cannot imagine a meal without bread. You should always take pleasure in your food and bread is delicious.' But for Francine, the benefits extend much further than the mouthwatering delight of tearing open a freshly baked baguette. She says it's an important source of carbohydrates, fibre, B vitamins and more: 'Bread gives us energy. If you don't have sugar in your blood, it's like having no petrol in your car.'

Different kinds of breads have different nutritional values. Generally speaking, white breads made with more processed flours are higher on the glycaemic index (GI), which causes a faster release of sugars into the blood. Wholegrain breads are usually considered to be lower GI, meaning their sugars take longer to break down, and could keep you feeling fuller for longer. 'The bigger the grains and the browner the bread, the lower the glycaemic index and the higher in fibre it will be,' says Francine. She notes, however, that wholegrain varieties won't suit everybody. For example, people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or other digestive issues may find white bread more calming to the digestion. 'If you have IBS, brown bread could just speed everything up,' she warns. The key is to look for the right bread to suit your needs. Another example is people with high blood pressure, who might need to look for a lower salt content in their bread.

What about gluten?

Another concern often associated with bread is its gluten content. Grains that contain gluten, such as wheat, spelt, barley and rye, need to be avoided by people with gluten sensitivities or serious conditions like coeliac disease. Luckily, there are many gluten-free grain- or legume-based flours and an increasing number of bakers are experimenting with them.

Ewa Ługowska, from Warsaw, Poland, is a food blogger who shares her recipes for gluten-free breads after turning to them for her gut health. 'Bread is a staple food and the basis of many meals in Poland,' she says. 'We love eating sandwiches with seasonal classics and many people of my generation remember early-morning breakfasts with warm bread straight from the



bakery. But when I switched to a gluten-free diet, it turned out to be good for my body and my intestines.' Ewa started creating gluten-free bread recipes, swapping the flour in traditional Polish wheat and rye breads for chickpea, buckwheat, rice, oat, chestnut or corn flours and sourdough starters. She also likes to add different seeds, grains and nuts, and experiments with adding vegetables like beetroot and pumpkin. Ewa's blog, Misa Mocy, has a large following, with many home bakers sending her feedback on her recipes. 'Every day, I get pictures of breads made from my recipes,' she says. 'It's not rocket science – real bread from an artisan baker or homemade is filled with the best intentions, good vibes, passion and love.' She's an emphatic fan of a sourdough starter for its health benefits, saying that gluten-free sourdough breads help reduce inflammation in people with coeliac disease who've recently started to avoid gluten.

So, whether you're a sourdough aficionado, home baker, a fan of French loaves or can't imagine enjoying a curry without a naan, there's a bread out there for you. 'It's so practical,' says Francine. 'You can put bread in your pocket and take it with you. The sandwich is the ultimate portable food – full of energy, potassium, iron, calcium, vitamins and, of course, pleasure!'

Words: Jade Beecroft

For more on Francine's work, go to dietconsulting.co.uk. Follow Ewa on Instagram @gf_breads and Facebook @gfbreads



POWER OF GOOD

Probiotic power. Sourdough starters contain probiotic bacteria similar to those found in some yoghurt and fermented foods, which are beneficial to gut health.

Mineral-rich. Iron, magnesium, calcium and zinc are present in many breads. Calcium helps maintain healthy bones and teeth, while iron is essential for healthy blood and energy.

Energy release. Bread is relatively low in calories – depending on what you pair it with or spread onto it – and can be a good source of carbohydrates. Browner breads tend to be lower-GI, meaning they release their sugars more slowly into the blood stream.

Vitamin-dense. Different breads contain a range of vitamins, including B-group vitamins like thiamine and niacin, which are important for skin, eyes and nails. Bread also contains folate, or folic acid, which is important during pregnancy to reduce the risk of problems in the baby's development.

Protein punch. Bread is a source of protein, which the body needs for growth, renewal and repair.

Fibre. The browner and seedier the bread, the more fibre it contains. Fibre helps to maintain a healthy digestive system, and controls blood sugar and cholesterol levels.

