

## A Toast to Toast

February 2020

In our family, the practice dates back to 1984, when our oldest son was three years old. It remains a stable staple in our house. Whether for comfort, relief, solace; whether for visionary purposes; whether to stave off starvation between meals, it is there. It is toast.

According to experts who have nothing better to do than determine characteristics and dynamics, if toast smothered on one side in butter drops to the floor, it will land butter-side down. I, a mother, could have saved these experts a great deal of time. In our house, butter side down every time. Our house boasted, however, a number of fascinating side effects. The jelly leapt from the toast as the descent began and embedded into every kitchen right angle within a two-foot radius. Additionally, the toast's butter whacked every surface as it fell: edge of table, underside of table, child's lap, leg of child's chair, floor, and—not surprisingly—dog's tongue. The dog transported the gooey mess to the living room rug.

In actuality, toast was the idea of the Romans, who spread the idea to Europe. Colonists brought this idea of burning bread in order to preserve it to the Americas. Ironically, the best toast, according to the British, is that which is made from stale bread. Websites argue over the Latin origin of “toast.” Is it *tostum* or *torrere*? Both suggest conflagration of some sort.

In our house, toast is an all-purpose elixir. Neither aspirin nor Alka-Seltzer, neither good book nor good TV western come forth as remedy. Toast does. Toast and tea after puking, toast and tomato soup after a terrible day, toast with butter and jelly and chocolate morsels after making it through *The Shining*. Toast is also the go-to recipe when I discover that I merely thought about removing the chicken from the freezer and never followed through. “We’re having toast,” I announce, and the family, like TV relics from the early 1960s, cries, with broad smiles, “Great idea!”

The wedding party bellows, “A toast to the bride and groom!” The villain, gun poised, hisses “You’re toast.” Toast, the original full-flavored treat has a history apart from imbibition and murder. In 1430, according to Wikipedia, which, surprisingly or not, dedicates a full entry to toast, this little delicacy is first mentioned as part of a recipe for Oyle Soppys, the other ingredients of which are flavored onions stewed in stale beer and “oil.” In the next two centuries, toast graduated to something like a maraschino cherry, discarded or eaten after flavoring drinks. Toast was not unnoticed by William Shakespeare. Falstaff heartily calls for “a quart of sack; put a toast in’t.”

I wonder how long it took for the word “toast” to flick away the cumbersome, niggling article “a”. “Toast” is a strong word, a singular syllable with hard consonants at fore and aft. In fact, children in England eat “soldiers,” toasted strips of bread which are used to scoop the runny, soft-boiled egg from a hole in the shell.

Consider the warmth of the toast just removed from the toaster. Consider how the butter glides, like pulling on an old, snuggly sweater or wrapping up in a fluffy blanket with a stuffed animal and a book. Motherhood's bliss came from the moments of loving comfort I could give my

children. At any time of day, the rich aroma of nearly burning bread filled the house. On toast days, long after I'd gone to work, I could turn my head abruptly and smell toast in my hair. Such a simple task, toast making, but its effect is monumental. The lingering smell, or the sudden aroma as I passed a well-lighted house with open windows on my way to work, carries me back to a long-ago Saturday morning or a weekday sickbed, a tousle-haired child swimming up through the mound of many blankets, croaking "Yes, toast, please." Rousting the child was then very easy. What was difficult was releasing the hug that I might patter to the kitchen.

We built a modest vocabulary around our toast making. The finished product became "jelly toast" even if no jelly had been added. For a time, we made toast in our toaster oven. The toaster oven was only second best to the real toaster that had died, but the little oven came with a feature: It offered a ding! when the toast was done. Long after the oven died, we still, when the toaster releases its two slices with a dull noise like "chunk", the one closest to this noise will call out to whomever, "Your toast just dinged." And then there is "the jelly smile." Toast is difficult to eat daintily unless the slice is cut into four triangles, a site on a plate that makes one lift his or her pinky finger and effect an "Oh my gracious." The rugged toast-cut-down-the-middle, or even remaining whole, is our family's preference, and it results in jelly to the left of the lips, jelly to the right. A jelly smile.

Today's finer restaurants must be worried about jelly smiles. A baguette slice, toasted, boasts a snippet of tomato and cheese, a bit of herbs and oil. Voila. But lacking in heft.

Toast making is a simple task in this era. When first invented, it was not. In the mid 1800s, it was prepared on a toasting fork. In *A Shilling Cookery for the People* (1854), the recipe's directives, which I have condensed a bit, read like a country dance: Hold a minute, turn, hold a minute, turn, to and fro, to and fro, turn, repeat. Picture the cook curtsyng, the fork held high as she turns and places, with a flourish, the toast on the dish. Brava!

Picture a mother in the 1990s, in jeans and hiking boots and a heavy coat over a flannel shirt, high in the summer-chilly Big Horn Mountains. She turns from the morning's camp fire as if in a dance, toasting fork in hand, and calls out to her fellow campers—a husband and three young sons—as if singing a song, "Come on, everybody, the toast just dinged!"