Quick bread

When he moved to Minneapolis for his internal medicine residency in 1987, Jeff Hertzberg, MD, couldn’t find anything that compared with the bread and pizza he grew up with in New York City. So he decided to try making his own. “I thought, What better time to take up a time-consuming hobby than in residency?” he says with a laugh.

Hertzberg, who is now a health informatics consultant, started with traditional techniques learned from his wife, who had worked at a coop during college. But he found the process complicated and time-consuming. “If you wanted to have bread that day, you couldn’t,” he explains.

So he went looking for a faster way. He began experimenting with high-moisture dough and found it could be stored in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. Hertzberg could come home from work, break off a piece, form it into a loaf and have fresh bread shortly after.

Cooking and bread making became his outlet—something he would do after coming home from the clinic or consulting. “It’s my opportunity to totally be creative,” Hertzberg says, adding that he does most of the cooking for his wife and two teenage daughters.

An on-air call to Lynn Rosetto Casper, host of American Public Media’s The Splendid Table, in 2000, led to more. At the urging of his wife, Hertzberg called in to ask for advice on how to publish a book about baking artisan bread using his simple, quick formula. An editor at St. Martin’s Press was listening and called Hertzberg to encourage him to put together a proposal. “But I didn’t do it,” he recalls.

Three years later, while at MacPhail Center for Music with his youngest daughter, he met another parent, Zoë François, who has written books on bread making with Zoë François, says they tested their recipes on their spouses and kids. “If the kids liked it and the spouse liked it, we were happy.”
who had trained as a pastry chef at the Culinary Institute of America. “We started talking, and I told her about the book offer. She said ‘You had a book offer and didn’t do it? Everyone in my world would kill for an opportunity like this.’”

Hertzberg agreed to put together a proposal if she would work on it with him. That was the beginning of Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day, the best-selling cookbook that brought Hertzberg and François to the attention of the New York Times and Associated Press in 2007 and turned what started as a hobby into a side business. The duo has since published three more books plus British, Taiwanese, Japanese and Chinese editions of the original.

Hertzberg admits he’s still surprised by the book’s popularity. (It has sold more than 400,000 copies.) “We did it on a whim,” he says. “We thought if we could get some press, it might sell.” He attributes some of its success to their being among the first cookbook authors to have a website where readers could ask questions. (He says they still answer four to five a day.)

“The first book was a lot of work,” Hertzberg recalls. “I can’t even imagine how many hours I spent in the evening and in the early morning working on it.” He describes developing recipes as a riff on the scientific method: You come up with a hypotheses (that wet dough could be stored for four days, for example) and then test and revise it. It’s how Hertzberg found his dough could be stored for up to two weeks.

He says his co-author forced him to be precise in his measurements, something he doesn’t do when cooking for his family, and to document his work. “I want cooking to be free-form, not a chore,” he says. Hertzberg admits they had their share of failures when developing recipes. “Some of our added vegetable breads failed, and some of our gluten-free recipes made spectacular bricks you could use as a doorstop.”

Hertzberg says the books have evolved with health trends and readers’ tastes. “I grew up eating white bread and white pasta, which are really not good for you,” he says, explaining that the recipes in the original book mainly used white flour. He says the second edition of Healthy Bread in Five Minutes a Day, which will come out in December, includes instructions for converting recipes to 100 percent whole-grain and using more unusual flours such as sprouted wheat and kamut. “We try to make it so anyone can get a decent bread,” he says.– KIM KISER

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