

## War Cake

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In war, time often seems to stand still, but it doesn't. People fall in love, marry, have babies, observe anniversaries and celebrate birthdays. During the siege of Sarajevo, many children celebrate four birthdays. As in many parts of the world, the ritual of celebration, whatever the occasion, is not complete without a cake. In Bosnia during the war, it is called *ratni kolac* (pronounced 'kolach') or 'war cake'.

While the Bosnian army, primarily men and a few women, holds the aggressor at bay on the front line, it is mostly the women left behind who assume total responsibility for the health and welfare of the children and, many times, the elderly.

Women often assume the task of collecting humanitarian aid, sometimes standing in long lines in dangerous places, or in the cold, for hours. Many times mothers must decide whether to take their young children with them, or leave them at home alone. Staples such as oil, rice, beans and flour are usually delivered in bulk to one building in each neighbourhood, where it is distributed in a fairly organised manner, according to the number of members in each household. Everyone must supply his or her own paper or plastic bags for the food, and containers for the oil. Deliveries are often erratic, and the amount of aid received small. Rice and beans are frequently distributed, causing residents to ask, "Does the world think Sarajevo is a *third world* country?" The resentment comes because Sarajevans feel the international community, especially Europe, is responding to the tragedy in Bosnia as though Bosnia is not a part of Europe.

Some families are lucky enough to have a small garden, lessening their dependence on humanitarian aid. During my first visit to the city in 1993, Jagger, my friend Renata's brother-in-law, takes me to visit a family living across the river and up the side of the mountain from Renata's apartment. The father is in the army and stationed out of Sarajevo. The mother cares for their two children; the girl is six, the boy is ten. The day we visit, our host makes *pita*, a baked Bosnian pastry stuffed with savoury fillings. On more than one occasion during the siege I have eaten empty *pita*, but because of their garden, she fills hers with fresh vegetables.

After lunch, the little girl takes me outside the two-room cottage to show me their garden etched into the cliff. The war's frontline lies just over the ridge only several hundred

metres away. The view of Sarajevo takes my breath away. My eyes focus on hundreds of red tile roofs, or at least what is left of them. From a distance, the devastation doesn't look so severe. The little girl stands at the edge of the cliff near several tomato plants loaded with ripe tomatoes. She sweeps her arm out, declaring, "Paradise!" I first think, "Wow, she really loves Sarajevo". Then I think, "Yes, it is a paradise, even in war!" Later, I learn that the Bosnian word for tomato is *paradajz*, pronounced 'paradise'. In any case, I will never forget the view, the tomatoes, or the hospitality that day.

Many women I meet, because of the uncertain and unfamiliar circumstances of war, try to comfort their children by recreating familiar tastes from the life they enjoyed before the war.

After the siege begins in the spring of 1992, days quickly stretch to weeks, weeks to months, and, finally, months to years. Ana, the mother of a nine-year-old boy, says, "The war turned washing, cleaning, cooking and other ordinary day-to-day housework into a daily struggle for survival. We suddenly found ourselves in a situation we never dreamed possible – living without electricity, gas, water and adequate food. But we discover a strange power inside us. We feel abandoned by the rest of the world and left alone to die, but pure pride, spite and anger forces us not to give up".

To create familiar, comforting food for her son, Ana experiments with substitutions and exchanges war recipes, some kept by older women since World War II. To make cream, she mixes yeast, powdered milk, water and salt and allows it to ferment overnight. For fake mayonnaise, she cooks flour and water, and then stirs in powdered milk and oil. Especially for her son, she makes French fries from corn flour, white flour, bicarbonate of soda and a little water. After mixing all the ingredients, she rolls the mixture out with a rolling pin, cuts out shapes resembling French fries, and then bakes them. Often she picks nettles and makes soup by adding rice, salt and water. Her speciality is "paste", a substitution for chicken paste. She mixes two large spoons of dried breadcrumbs, two spoons of dried yeast (large bags of it are often found in humanitarian aid packages), one onion chopped and roasted, and enough water to bind the ingredients together, and then adds all the spices she has available, including mustard if she has some. Finally she spreads the mixture on biscuits or bread, and her family enjoys a hint of a treat they knew before the war.

If there is wood, carpet, old shoes, books or parts of furniture to build a fire, Ana uses her family's flour ration to make bread. After preparing the dough, she uses her pressure cooker to save energy. She cooks the dough for about ten minutes, opens it, turns it over and then cooks the other side. She says, "When it is done the bread is heavy and dense, but it is hot and smells so good. In the winter, we cannot wait to eat it at dinner, so we eat it the moment it comes out of the pot".

When I go to Italy to buy supplies, I always bring back cinnamon and vanilla, almond and lemon flavouring for the women in the neighbourhood. Some might think it a frivolous gift, but the tiny bottles are inexpensive and take no space in my pocket. The small gifts return the women to a tiny part of their pre-war reality of creating desserts with real flavouring. Women tell me sweets are a big part of the Sarajevan culture. It is only after the war that I understand how important! When the stores reopen, I discover dessert shops scattered all over town, especially on every block of the main pedestrian cobblestone street of the old town.

Cake, or *kolac* as it is called in Bosnian, tops the list of favourite desserts, especially ones made at home. A good host would not be caught without *kolac* to offer unexpected guests. Bosnians pride themselves on their hospitality, especially hospitality to strangers. During the 1984 Olympics there were not enough hotel rooms in Sarajevo to accommodate visitors, so the government appealed to the people to open their homes to visitors, and they did.

Although cake improvised in war circumstances usually can outwardly be recognised as cake, many times it's difficult to identify the ingredients. Certainly, it won't contain eggs, and maybe not milk, flour or flavouring. There is no shortage of flour. I arrived with several tonnes of it on my first flight into the city, but with the absence of electricity and gas, flour is useless unless you want to make dried pasta for a future meal or glue for a child's art project.

Bread or biscuit crumbs top the list as the best flour substitute for war cake. Ana calls it "bread cake". She mixes a couple of cups of dried breadcrumbs with a little oil, sugar or artificial sweetener, a little powdered milk or water, and presses it into a cake pan. Before serving, she spreads the top with the cream mixture made from powdered milk and sugar.

On the birthday of a friend's four-year-old daughter, a teenage boy brings a gift – the cake. The children and adults are surprised to find raisins in the cake, but the teenager says, "No, they are not real raisins, they are artificial. My mother made them from soy flour and concentrated juice". Everyone is amazed at how much the chewy dark brown pieces resemble raisins. Later he admits it is a joke. The raisins are real. Then someone comments, "It is sad, even tragic; we have gone without for so long that we do not recognise reality even when we are eating it".

During my visits to Sarajevo in the siege, various hosts serve me war cake. Always they place two pieces on the plate – I think a symbol of abundance and of generosity. If only one piece is available, they cut it into half to make two. I never question the custom or the ingredients. The taste is not important. What is important is the woman's hospitality and her effort to maintain a sense of normalcy and tradition for herself and her family amid the chaos of war.

Celebrating milestones such as birthdays, weddings and anniversaries affirms our existence and helps us define who we are. For any one caught in a war – guest or host – *kolac*, however prepared, brings a sense of sanity and hope for the future.

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