

Why Am I Marketing Baltic Rye Bread?

by John Melngailis – Black Rooster Food LLC

I am Emeritus Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Maryland. I could be consulting, teaching, or continuing research on nanotechnology, the technology responsible for our information age and much more. – work that I have enjoyed for many years. Instead, I am marketing Baltic rye bread.

Why? Because I believe, and I am not alone, that the critical issue facing us today is the health of our population. Persuading people to eat the super-healthy, 100% whole-grain rye sourdough bread of my homeland and of my family is my small, personal contribution to improving health. More sophisticated electronics, to which I have contributed in my long career, will not do it. In fact, you could argue that it has contributed to our health problems.

Why specifically this bread? The first reason is my personal connection to it, and the second is its scientifically proven health benefits and its affordability.

Personal Connection

My family came to the United States in December 1949 from a DP (displaced persons) camp in Germany. Just as Syrian refugees today are fleeing death and destruction, we left Latvia in October 1944 in advance of the Soviet Red army. We were fortunate to end up in the United States, in our case, in a remote corner of Western Pennsylvania. I was warmly welcomed as a 10-year-old fourth-grader in the local one-room schoolhouse. My parents were happy to have a roof over our heads, plenty of



Black Rooster Food dark rye being prepared for baking in Brooklyn, NY

food available, work, good prospects for their children's future

But the bread. We lived out in the countryside and the only bread we could get from the local stores was Wonder Bread or its equivalent. To us it did not feel like bread, it did not smell like bread, it did not taste like bread, and we noticed that a hungry stray dog would not eat it. As a businesswoman in Latvia, my mother had never baked bread, yet she was determined to bake dense, hundred percent whole-grain Latvian rye bread, or "rupjmaize" as we know it. It was, and is, the antithesis of Wonder Bread: no nutrients removed by refining, no false, chemically-derived, nutrients or preservatives added. Yet it naturally has a long shelf life. But where to get whole-grain rye flour? It was not to be found in any near-by stores. My mother got a bushel of rye grain from one of the local farmers, who was growing it for some purpose other than bread baking. But how can we mill the grain into flour? The father of one of my classmates had a mill on his farm for grinding corn for pig feed. He was willing to use it to mill our rye grain. I remember him first running some wheat through the mill to clean out the pig feed and then running our rye grain through the mill twice.

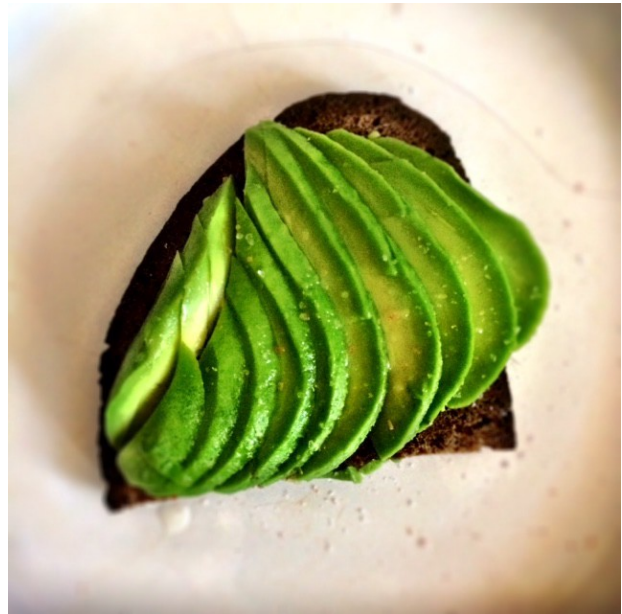
My mother was born in 1896 and lived on her family farm to about age 19. With the help of an old Latvian cookbook and some childhood memories she began baking and soon developed an excellent “rupjmaize.” She baked almost to the end of her life at age of 91.

After she died I found other sources of rye bread: a Lithuanian bakery in Boston where we lived (it closed), a Latvian bakery in Hartford Connecticut that would ship the bread to us (it closed), and later buying it flown in from Latvia. Ken Gabriel, a colleague in the business school at University of Maryland, where I am a professor, tasted the bread and thought it was awesome. He said “we have to market it.” So we set up a small business and for a couple of years sold “rupjmaize” at Whole Foods in the Washington DC area flown in from Latvia. When the value of the dollar shrank from \$1.28 per euro to \$1.68 per euro we had to stop. We found a bakery in Brooklyn, New York Bread, that was able to duplicate the recipe. We reorganized the company and brought in my brother Ivars who now sells our “rupjmaize” on the web. We have been selling the bread largely in the New York area for 11 years. I’m not earning any money for myself doing this, so why do it?

Health Crisis

We are facing a health crisis in the U.S.: obesity, diabetes, heart disease, etc. An important factor contributing to the poor health of our population is the excessive consumption of industrial, over-processed food thanks to the drive for corporate profits aided by misguided government subsidies. I am convinced that introducing our rye bread to the American diet would be helpful. It is delicious paired with traditional rich foods like smoked salmon, grilled sausage, herring, bacon and eggs,

schmaltz, butter, cheese and so on. It also pairs well with healthy vegetarian foods like nut butters, avocado, radishes, hummus, cucumbers, or raw honey. To any rich food it provides the counterbalance: the fiber and body which allows the rich food to be properly digested. So far we have had some success in gourmet stores and with consumers with Northern or Eastern European roots. Ideally, I would like to introduce the bread to the general American public. My quest may seem quixotic.



Avocado on Baltic rye with sea salt and lime juice.

I often like to say: ***Everything is backwards. This is the richest country, yet it has the world’s worst diet. The rich are thin, the poor are obese. The good food is in the big cities, the unhealthy food is in the countryside where food is grown. And now I am marketing the most humble Latvian peasant bread in gourmet stores.***

In Latvia, our rye bread or “rupjmaize” is a staple food, particularly for the less well-to-do. (Everything there is not backwards.) Hearty whole-grain bread with a long shelf life has sustained the Northern Europeans for centuries. Even today you see very few who are obese or

even overweight. Diet may be a key factor. I want the U.S., my adopted country to which I owe so much, to benefit from my experience.

Health Benefits

Let me first make some nonscientific claims. Based on what I know from my own body and from what friends and family have said, whole-grain rye bread is satiating. It makes you feel full in a wholesome way. My own taste buds tell me that our rye bread is the ideal accompaniment to rich foods. I would find eating a teaspoon of pure butter or schmaltz by itself revolting. Yet spread on a slice of rye bread it is delicious. The same can be said for other rich foods.

Scientific Studies

A fair amount of research has been done in the area of rye bread and nutrition. I have looked at the conclusions in much of the peer-reviewed literature on the subject. Then I found a review article that exhaustively summarizes the field. It has 15 coauthors from 8 universities from Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. [title: “Rye and health - where do we stand and where do we go” *Trends in Food Science and Technology* (Elsevier) vol. 79,(2018) p.78-87. The Corresponding author is Rikard Landberg rikard.landberg@chalmers.se.

Measuring the health benefits of specific foods scientifically is more difficult than, say, measuring the velocity of light or the melting point of silicon. It is difficult to exactly repeat an experiment to verify the results as it would be in the so called “exact” sciences. – too many uncontrolled variables. Nevertheless the sheer volume of positive results from many researchers that argue for the health benefits of rye bread is convincing.

The article discusses several areas where rye is expected to have a positive impact on health including glucose and insulin metabolism, weight management, cholesterol reduction, and colorectal cancer prevention. The benefits are supported by conclusions of research papers published in peer-reviewed journals.

Gluten content of food has become a concern for many Americans. Some healthcare practitioners continue to group wheat, oats, barley and rye together under the heading of “gluten grains” and to ask for elimination of the entire group on a gluten-free diet. Other practitioners now treat wheat separately from these other grains, including rye, based on recent research. Wheat is unquestionably a more common source of food reaction than any of the other “gluten grains,” including rye. Stanley Ginsberg in his book “The Rye Baker” discusses in technical detail the chemistry in the rye dough and in rye bread. The action of gluten in rye is quite different from what it is in wheat. Wheat bread depends on gluten to give it a porous structure, but the gluten hardens rather quickly causing the bread to become stale. Rye bread, on the other hand, does not depend on gluten to give it structure but rather on a starchy gel which remains tender long after baking and explains why rye bread stays fresh for weeks. In addition, the rye kernel contains a lactic acid producing bacteria as well as wild yeast which turn simple sugars into lactic acid just as in yogurt, buttermilk and sour cream. It is this combination of factors which results in the long shelf life of rye bread and the absence of mold. A long *New York Times* article (“Rye Rises Again” Food Section, January 11, 2017) also states that the gluten content of rye is lower than that of wheat. A couple of friends and relatives who are gluten intolerant are nevertheless able to comfortably eat the rye bread.

In the past, diet was largely determined by availability, taste, and tradition. Nowadays a bewildering array of foods is available, tradition is diffuse and taste is manipulated chemically, and by advertising. Food claims based on scientific studies abound leading the various fads.

So it is with some skepticism that I have nevertheless cited scientific studies showing the benefits of rye bread. For my part I pay attention to my taste buds and how the food makes me feel.

The Future

Over the past 12 years I have spent thousands of hours demoing rye bread in stores. Somehow doing two 4 hour back-to-back demos in one day on my feet has been less tiring than uplifting.



My dream is that someday more people will buy our rye bread with food stamps than with American Express gold cards. We are far from realizing the dream. At the moment Black Rooster Food is selling Baltic rye bread in 35 stores, 3 restaurants in NYC, and one prestigious catering company in DC. Of the

stores, 21 are in the NYC area and 5 in the Boston area, and 9 in the Washington DC area. We also sell the bread on the web.

An interesting observation due to recent events which led me to write a little blurb for the Latvian Newspaper Laiks which translated into English is **Food for hard times**

My father was a student in Moscow during the first world war. Latvian University was moved there from Riga because war was raging on our soil. As an only child he did not have to serve. Students were given a ration of about half a kilo or slightly more of rye bread per week. In the university cafeteria sometimes there was some runny soup, often not. But at least he had the most fundamental food.

In Soviet Times in Riga rye bread was baked in two large factories. It was a state monopoly, just like electricity or gas. Rye bread was cheap and available to everyone, other food -- not always. But again the most fundamental food was there.

Today we also are suffering hard times. During the first week of covid 19 quarantine in the US. Our rye bread on line orders tripled. I guess even today people need the most fundamental food.

Over the years, the United States has absorbed food traditions from all parts of the world. It takes time and it starts with the more affluent, well-traveled, and adventurous eaters. In 1966 when I returned from a year in Paris, hardly anyone knew what a baguette was. Now they are everywhere. Similarly, 50 years ago sushi in the U.S. was almost nonexistent.

Rye bread may be starting on a similar path. Recently some articles have appeared pointing to this: *New York Magazine* "Rye's rise", Sept.

15, 2013 (it features our bread among others), (the article is also available at <http://www.grubstreet.com/2013/09/new-rye-breads.html>). *The New York Times*, (“Rye Rises Again” Food Section, January 11, 2017), and Seriouseat.com, an online publication devoted an article to our endeavor:

<http://newyork.seriouseats.com/2011/07/good-bread-black-rooster.html>.

Given the density of our rye bread, it works best for open face sandwiches. Open face sandwiches are beginning to appear with increasing frequency in the food scene in New York and beyond: Dean and DeLuca, and The Great Northern Food Hall in Grand Central Terminal are serving open face sandwiches. The rapidly growing chain Le Pain Quotidien serves only open face sandwiches. They call them tartines.

Perhaps people are beginning to appreciate the arguments I have made above for more natural less processed food. The simple honest taste based on freshness in Nordic cuisine is attractive and Nordic restaurants and eateries seem to be opening more and more in New York City. I can see the beginning of a trend.

There is a clear movement away from over-processed industrial foods toward more natural products. However, in many cases this move is inhibited by the expense of healthier foods. Thus the less affluent have a diet based on industrial, heavily advertised, poor quality food. This is where our bread could find its place. In Northern Europe it continues to be a staple food, not only for the gourmets, but particularly for the less affluent. Why not here? Rye bread can be quite inexpensive, it's nutritious, delicious, healthy, and has a long

shelf life. If whole grain rye sourdough bread became a staple food in our diet, the health of our population would improve.