

From Beans to Bread: The Community at the Heart of The Bread Lab

« Previous / Next »

foodanthro / April 27, 2019 / anthropology

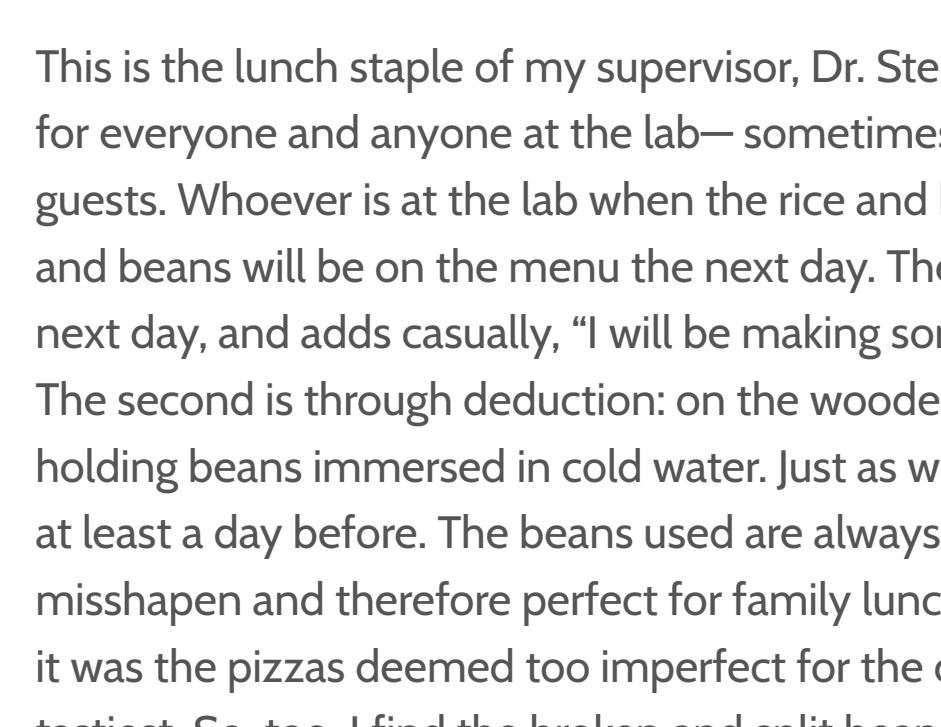
Laura Valli, PhD candidate

The Bread Lab, Washington State University

Bread Lab: what is the first image this phrase evokes for you? Maybe an artisanal sourdough loaf with a dark golden crust and chewy inside? A pile of such loaves? Or a wide selection of breads, representative of different culinary traditions across the globe?

These are indeed images from the Bread Lab, where skilled and knowledgeable people who care about good bread experiment with different grains, mills in many sizes and ovens that a home baker could only dream of.

However, when I think of the Bread Lab, I envision rice and beans.



This is the lunch staple of my supervisor, Dr. Stephen Jones. He prepares rice and beans about once a week for everyone and anyone at the lab—sometimes to accompany our lab meetings, sometimes to feed our guests. Whoever is at the lab when the rice and beans are ready is welcome. There are two hints that rice and beans will be on the menu the next day. The first is direct: Dr. Jones asks what time your classes are the next day, and adds casually, “I will be making some rice and beans tomorrow. Would you be interested?” The second is through deduction: on the wooden table in the lab baking area you notice a container holding beans immersed in cold water. Just as with sourdough bread, preparations for rice and beans start at least a day before. The beans used are always locally grown, often a mixture of different varieties, misshapen and therefore perfect for family lunches. These remind me of a pizzeria owner’s comment that it was the pizzas deemed too imperfect for the customers and thus shared among the staff that were the tastiest. So, too, I find the broken and split beans are the creamiest and also tastiest when shared with others.

The meal is ritualistic with a firm set of steps to follow. Everybody goes through the same procedure exactly in the same order. We line up according to our arrival time in the kitchen. Everyone starts with a fork and a small bowl. We assemble our lunch by first scooping some plain brown rice (the saucepan on the left) into our bowl. The rice is then topped with the beans (the saucepan on the right) that sometimes is seasoned with chunks of smoked ham for added depth of flavor. Next, everyone grates aged cow’s cheese on top of their food, the heaped fluffy pile melting quickly into the hot rice and beans. Occasionally there are additional toppings, such as raw onion, shredded cabbage or slices of avocado. But when it comes to condiments, hot sauce is a must: at least five different kinds are offered. Heat is something that I still do not tolerate, and even though I was told that the hot sauce is not optional, I sprinkle sea salt flakes instead. For the crunch factor there are tortilla chips (conspicuously labeled as organic, non-GMO, without any preservatives), another non-negotiable element of the bowl. Last we pick up tall brown glasses of water.

Once we fill our bowls, we gather around the table and sit on red plastic chairs with black wheels. There are four large tables in the baking area at the lab. With eight people working at the lab, we could each have a table for two. Yet we always prefer to stick together as a group, elbows almost touching. We eat, sometimes we joke, sometimes we exchange news, sometimes we eat in silence, a silence is filled with the sounds of ticking, munching and crunching.

I move back and forth from my seat to the stovetop, adding a bit more of this and that to the bowl as I eat, to keep the proportions just to my liking. I always seem to underestimate the amount of cheese. As people empty their bowls, they are reluctant to leave the table right away. Sometimes it is the engaging group discussions that prevent us from returning to our offices, at other times we linger in stillness, each in our own thoughts. The pots and pans are never emptied, there are always leftovers. My theory is that it is due to our consideration for the collective.

The shared experience of repast punctuates the day. The simple meal of rice and beans is emblematic of the ethos of the Bread Lab. Both are unpretentious, welcoming, accessible, accommodating, wholesome and community-oriented—just the way we think of our bread and work. These values are also perfectly embodied in the Bread Lab’s latest project, the approachable loaf (<http://thebreadlab.wsu.edu/the-bread-lab-collective>). The approachable loaf is a more wholesome alternative to the traditional white sandwich bread with all of its appealing features (softness, rectangular shape, even slices), but more flavor and no unnecessary ingredients. Bakers across the country are encouraged to sign up to become members of the Bread Lab Collective and start baking the Approachable Loaf, thereby making wholesome and nutritious bread more accessible and affordable for their communities. (See Ms. Valli’s [previous post in FoodAnthro](#), April 11, 2019, which reviews Aaron Bobrow-Strain’s *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-Bought Loaf*. Beacon Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-080704467-4).

Dr. Jones, a plant geneticist focusing on wheat breeds, founded the Bread Lab in 2011 initially as part of the Washington State University Mount Vernon Research Center and now housed in its own facility at the Port of Skagit. The Bread Lab is his way of working towards a more sustainable alternative than large-scale commercial agriculture dependent on monocultures, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

The researchers at the Bread Lab work with the community—farmers, bakers and consumers are all welcome and their voices are heard. Our collaboration helps us find grain varieties that are good for farmers (good yield and disease resistance), for bakers (good baking properties and flavor) and for people to eat (nutrition, flavor and affordability).

I think of Dr. Jones as a true Renaissance scientist, with an interdisciplinary approach that closely aligns with the principles of anthropology. It took little to convince him to include an anthropologist. I joined the Bread Lab four months ago as the first anthropologist, and hopefully not the last. My research focuses on the agronomy and social history of rye; current U.S. attitudes towards growing and consuming rye; women’s labor on farms and in bakeries; and power relations within kitchen. The Bread Lab is my intellectual haven and artisanal hotspot in the Pacific Northwest.

Share this:

[Email](#) [Facebook](#) [Reddit](#) [Twitter](#) [Print](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Tumblr](#)

[Like](#) One blogger likes this.

Related

[Review: Our Daily Bread](#)
January 25, 2021
In "anthropology"

[Dreamworlds of the Store-Bought Loaf](#)
March 15, 2012
In "book reviews"

[What FoodAnthropology Is Reading Now, February 10, 2021](#)
February 10, 2021
In "anthropology"

« Previous [Review: Baking, Bourbon and Black Drink](#) Next » [Going for the Gumbo](#)

Published by [foodanthro](#)

[View all posts by foodanthro](#)

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Search ...

Search

Search FoodAnthropology

RSS - Posts

RSS - Comments