

Rye bread as a baking experience

Germany, Austria and Switzerland are known all over the world for their variety of breads. In Erschmatt, in the Swiss canton of Valais, the villagers still bake rye bread in the historic bakery, as was customary for centuries. With hands, wooden tools and a lot of time!



The old stone oven in the community center in Erschmatt is only fired up once a year. Ash and embers are removed before the loaves go into the oven. The heat from the stones is sufficient to bake the rye bread / © Photo: Georg Berg

Once a year, in December, they heat up the old stove in the parish hall. Then the fire and leaven is passed from family to family. Rye bread has been baked in Erschmatt for centuries. What used to be vital for self-sufficient people is now preserving old traditions. This baking experience is also made accessible to tourists with the Erschmatt Roggen World of Adventure.



Flour trough and wooden paddle instead of kneading machine / © Photo: Georg Berg

"We don't sell the bread, we sell the experience. The knowledge of how rye bread was made in the traditional way," explains Edmund Steiner from Erlebnisswelt Roggen Erschmatt. Winter rye is the grain of the north. It is

sown in October. Then grows a little before the snow comes and roots deeply. Valais rye bread is protected with the AOC designation of origin. For this, the rye must have grown in Valais. You can buy Valais rye bread in almost every bakery in Valais.



The team: David Da Pieve (left) is the owner on this day, who heats the oven, loads the bread, monitors the baking process and ensures that the bread is baked optimally. Edmund Steiner leads through the practical part of the workshop. His wife Marianne coordinates the entire baking experience and prepares lunch together / © Photo: Georg Berg

The historical bakery in Erschmatt

The bakery is in the old town house. It is 300 years old, as old as the stone oven. Edmund Steiner bravely reaches into the flour sack and talks about bread. Its importance in the past and the preservation of the tradition today. In Erschmatt, the rye dough is still prepared in a flour trough. There is no kneading machine, only hands. Hands that pull wooden paddles through the dough as an auxiliary tool. Baking bread used to be a man's job and one of the reasons why bread was rarely baked. The men only had time for bread when the vegetation was dormant.



Baking bread used to be a male thing. Since baking was only done two or three times a year, large amounts of dough had to be handled with simple tools / © Photo: Georg Berg

Hard life, hard bread

People used to be self-sufficient. Back then, there was no daily fresh bread from the baker, as we know it today. The stone oven in the community bakery was in operation around the clock on baking days. Baking was done day and night, and fire and leaven were passed down from family to family. The old stone oven offers space for 200 loaves of bread. The region's dry climate favors storage and hardens the rye bread without spoiling it. According to Edmund Steiner, hard bread was still better than no bread at all. The bread was then split because it was already too hard to cut and could be soaked in soups or milk. A tip from the old days: If a slightly dry loaf of bread is covered with a damp kitchen towel in the evening, it will be easier to slice the next day.



A quick look through the window into the historic bakery. The bakery has to be heated up so that the dough can rise. The dough was ready for 12 hours before the workshop started / © Photo: Georg Berg

Knead, shape and stamp loaves of bread

It's warm in the bakery. A pleasant sour smell is in the air. Edmund Steiner prepared around 15 kg of pre-dough to prepare for the workshop. This will be enough for about 20 loaves of bread. The dough is warm and moist. Flour is mixed in. Six kilos of rye flour, grown in Valais, and one kilo of sourdough as well as water and salt are processed. Add to that time and work. Steiner puts the flour into the trough based on feeling and experience. The dough will be very sticky at first. The flour is worked into the dough with long wooden spatulas.



Before the workshop participants get to work themselves, Edmund Steiner shows how to work the cracks and crevices out of the rye dough / © Photo: Georg Berg

When Edmund Steiner works with the dough, it looks very playful. It guides the dough across the worktop like a ball. We should only use the heel of our hand to knead, not our fingers. That way you can use the power better. All cracks and crevices in the dough should be gone at the end.



Supervised kneading with Edmund Steiner: First I'll show you how I do it and then I'll show you how it's easier! On the worktop dusted with flour we form cone-shaped dough pieces. The perfect shape to add a stamp to your own bread / © Photo: Georg Berg

Edmund Steiner forms a roll of dough from which he takes the dough pieces. The size of the bread is now determined. Rye is a compact grain. It is ideal to bring the dough into the shape of a cone at the end. Gaps in the dough are undesirable, so the cone is thrown heartily onto the workbench again so that it bangs.



There are wooden stamps with the coat of arms of Erschmatt. With a sword and the patron St Michael, a star, the mountains and a shamrock / © Photo: Georg Berg

A stamp is pressed onto the dough piece with wooden embossing moulds. This is how the villagers could tell their breads apart after the baking process. Today, workshop participants live out their play instinct and decorate their own bread. To ensure that the crust breaks open in a controlled manner during baking, three notches are made with the knife.



In the bakery it is now 26 degrees, later in the oven even 300 degrees. Therefore, it is good if the loaves of bread still have some flour on them. That way they don't turn black straight away, explains Edmund Steiner and dusts flour through an almost empty flour sack onto the dough pieces / © Photo: Georg Berg



Off to the oven. The rye breads are baked at around 300 degrees / © Photo: Georg Berg

Freshly dusted with flour, the loaves of bread are carried to the outbuilding. There is also an imposing oven here, which Ofner David Da Pieve had already heated up hours ago. The oven is now at 300 degrees and the loaves are baked for around 60 minutes. Time for a tour of Erschmatt.

The hardship of self-sufficiency

I still don't really want to understand why bread was so rarely baked in the villages back then. Edmund Steiner describes the everyday life of the villagers, which visitors can still see at various locations in Erschmatt. The tour of the village is part of the workshop. All the equipment for threshing grain is available in the barn. The rye fields are clearly visible from the edge of the village. Being self-sufficient was exhausting

and labor intensive. Everything was made by hand. Wine, bread, meat, flour, milk, vegetables, potatoes. People were always busy. In winter, when there was little to do on the farm, it was finally time for bread.



Edmund Steiner points to the rye fields above Erschmatt. Valais rye has been grown on the terraces for centuries. A tour of the village including vivid descriptions of the hard life back then is part of the workshop Baking Rye Bread / © Photo: Georg Berg

Of emigrants and worker farmers

Back then, when bread was baked in the village, it was a community event. One family after the other then baked their bread in the community bakehouse. This happened two or three times a year at most. When the work in the field was finished in November and all the meadows were mowed, the men could go to the bakery. Before the growing season started again in April, the loaf was baked again. Then it was back out into the fields. Before industrialization, the village of Erschmatt had between 200 and 300 inhabitants. There wasn't enough land for more people. The others had to emigrate. When industry settled in the Rhone Valley at the beginning of the 20th century, the farmers often became labourers, who worked in the valley during the day and looked after their land after work. A road to the village was not built until 1956. Before that, everything went on foot or by mule. Worker farmers existed until the early 1970s.



The workshop also includes a tour of Erschmatt. You can still thresh rye in the old barn / © Photo: Georg Berg

In Valais there are still around 40 old community ovens that are used once a year. The people keep tradition alive. Baking in the community is no longer intended for self-sufficiency. The bread is eaten immediately or frozen. Nothing has changed in the dry climate, so that even today you can have sliced bread for about a month if you put the loaf well wrapped in the bread box.

travel tip

Erschmatt in the municipality of Leuk in Valais is also called the *rye village*. Visitors can get to know old rye varieties and rare plants in the variety garden. You can thresh and grind rye or bake rye bread in the village bakery according to old tradition and with old equipment.

Booking the event: [Baking rye bread the traditional Valais way – the rustic experience](#)

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