

The Dough

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, September 2013

"I remember your mother's kitchen always smelled so good...like a bakery," a childhood friend, whom I hadn't seen in years, remarked recently. "There was always something good coming out of the oven." Yes, she was definitely right. Weekly in our kitchen my industrious and diligent Bessarabien mother produced heaps and heaps of fresh dough, much to the amazement of my young friends. Dough for buns, white and brown breads, platz, noodles, strudel, warentiki, cookies and cakes and rhubarb turnovers. Iced paska was baked in cans at Easter, deep fried fritters with raisins were usually only made on New Year's, and for Christmas dozens of shortbread cookies and gingersnaps cooled in staked trays on the counters. You name it, she made it. Fresh yeast, brown farm fresh eggs, pounds of butter, cans of Crisco shortening, and enormous sacks of flour in the basement, and delivered regularly, were staples in our home. With her strong hands, I would watch her mix large bowls of dough to exactly the right consistency each and every time. Not too thick. Not too thin. On days when she would have to leave to walk to town for an errand, she would instruct me, "When the dough rises punch it down. Then wait till it rises again and punch it down gently once more. Not more than twice, do you understand?" As I nodded in agreement, she would then add, "And watch it carefully," as she turned and went out the door. On cold winter days she would place the bowls on the floor on top of the heating registers on the floor to help the yeast rise. Needless to say, there were times when I did not watch it carefully enough, as I would find the dough expanding at an enormous rate of speed, spilling out over the top and lifting the clean starched linen dishcloths that covered it. Mortified, I would try to contain it back into the bowl, and although I rarely told my mother my adventures I think that she always somehow knew. Then onto the table she would plop the dough, where she had spread out flour with an exact science, and then knead and roll the dough to the exact same thickness every time. When making strudel, she would hold the dough high in the air with both hands and flip it over and over as it expanded to twice its size. Then, twisting it into long strands she would place it perfectly into the pressure cooker on top of the meat and potatoes. When making noodles, the large circles of dough were first draped over clean towels on tables to dry before being cut into thin strands, but not before I would often take a knife, chopping off chunks of the corners and devouring the raw dough. Several years ago when a friend bought a bread maker, my mother laughed and remarked to her, "THIS is a bread maker," as she held her weathered hands high in the air and we all chuckled.

Over the years, I had shared her baking with many grateful friends and co-workers, and so it came to be that when I offered to bake for the wedding of a daughter of a friend recently, the bride requested that I bake peppermint cookies, one of her favorites. "Sure," I responded. "Will do," as inwardly I silently cringed. As the day of the wedding approached I was relieved to have found my mother's recipe for the cookies in her notebook, written in the old Gothic script, but one which I had been used to seeing over the years and was able to decipher. So on a cold and windy December evening off to the drugstore I went to buy the baking ammonia, this being where my mother had always procured it, bringing it home in a small brown bag, where it had to be requested behind the dispensing counter. "Oh," said the pharmacist. "You can now buy it at the grocery store," as off I went. The grocery store sent me to the bulk food store, where they again sent me back to the grocery store. My patient husband who was waiting for me in the car began to get impatient as I requested he then

drive to a different grocery store, where I ran into the bakery aisle. Unsuccessful, I went to the pharmacy, where they again sent me back to the baking aisle. My luck then suddenly turned, I felt, as I spotted a group of young Amish women in the aisle. "Baking ammonia?" they asked with a confused look on their faces. "Never heard of it," as my eyes continued to scan the shelves and I pictured my husband sitting in the idling car outside. Finally, there on a top shelf, hidden away, was the precious item I was seeking. And so it was, that at the wedding, with a dessert table laden with delectable sweets, the bride stood with only two cookies on her plate. One, a cookie baked by her grandmother, and the other, one of mine.

"Maybe make some strudel and bring it sometime when you come," my mother remarks to me on a recent visit. "It would taste so good." I sigh inwardly and tell her that I will certainly see what I can do. As I open my kitchen cupboards I see her rolling pins, four in total, which still seem to have a certain shine to them. One of them has cracked handles. But it is not the rolling pins that I am reaching for. I grab several boxes of Betty Crocker cake mixes and cans of icing as I prepare to make a "gender reveal" cake for my expectant niece. The rolling pins will have to be patient for their next debut...