Brotzeit: dispatch from Munich

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It is the day before the long Easter weekend and Munich grocery stores have resumed their affluent stocks. There are fewer signs asking shoppers to buy only one pack of toilet paper and shelves are once again heavy with potatoes. But, at the store closest to my apartment, one section remains bare. A gap in an otherwise full aisle provisioned with plenty.

After toilet paper, baking supplies were the first to go. Shoppers with lemons on their lists or appetites for the first of Italy's green asparagus to cross into Germany were in luck. But those with homemade bread cravings less so. "Wir haben keine Hefe mehr!" (We have no more yeast!) announced a sign in one shop. In another, the bare shelves that once stocked bread flour spoke for themselves. Based on the concept of voting with your fork, the first ingredients to sell out during a pandemic express collective concerns.

Some years ago, I asked my students—mostly young Germans, many with more than one mother tongue—what they miss most when abroad. "Bread!" a chorus replied. Their timing almost felt rehearsed, their answer self-evident and without pause. A five-letter word that represents a culture's culinary allegiance. A synonym for comfort, for certainty.

Bavaria prides itself on traditions, from its white sausages and sweet mustard to pillowy pretzels and supersized beer. Nestled between these staples is Brotzeit. Its literal translation is "bread time," but its culinary translation is less about time and more about choreography: a savory spread that gathers the likes of bread and pretzels, radishes and onions, cheese, and dried sausages. Classic beer-garden fare. As its name suggests, the accompaniments all rally around bread.

In times of certainty, bread symbolizes a basic, a given, a right. In times of crisis, these meanings shine brighter still.

Bread is a currency that crosses borders. On social media, I've been watching friends and colleagues show off pictures of their young sourdough starters with the kind of pride new parents reveal a child. A German colleague stranded in New Zealand has named her starter Greta. A friend in Brooklyn messaged me with the disclaimer "do not judge," followed by the confession that he ordered 125 pounds of flour from a restaurant supply store. His local market was flourless and, as a long-term sourdough baker, he figured this flour could be his financial backup plan. Across borders, people are baking bread for calm, food, and a Plan B. Let's call it panic baking.

In February, the release of *Rage Baking: The Transformative Power of Flour, Fury, and Women's Voices* caused another panic. What came off as a snappy title turned out to be stolen. Ten days after its publication, in the article "The Privilege of Rage," performance artist Tangerine Jones shared her frustration that this book whitewashes a term she started using in 2015. So, in my writing of panic baking, I wish to acknowledge her work and the many meanings of kneading dough.

In Munich, bakeries are still open and because of the required one-and-a-half-meters between customers, some of them attract the kind of lines textbooks associate with East Germany. And yet more people are choosing to bake their own bread, clearing stores of yeast and creating a market for an organic farm/brewery/shop to start selling its thirty-year-old starter.

On March 18, after fifteen years as chancellor, Angela Merkel delivered a speech for the first time that was not her annual New Year's address. "Take it seriously," she warned about COVID-19. But don't panic, she advised, reassuring the nation that if a store's shelves are empty today, they will be restocked tomorrow. Maybe toilet paper, but adequate baking supplies seem to be harder to maintain.

What defines the panic in panic buying? Does the buying amplify the panic or cure it? Is the panic from not having something or from uncertainty? Is it the buying that is comforting, the practice and perfume of baking, the eating, or just knowing that you have flour in case you need it?

The same year my students chanted "Bread!" I wrote an article about what I called the clashing cults of sourdough

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FIGURE 1: *Grocery store in Munich, Germany, April 2020.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY L. SASHA GORA © 2020

revival and the gluten-free movement. After finishing the piece, I realized my argument contradicted the title. But I kept it, stringing it like bait for the conclusion. At heart, both movements share the same concern, I argued: the desire for control in an industrialized and globalized food system. The same applies to panic baking. Now that beer gardens are taped-off in Munich, Brotzeit doubles as a description of this peculiar time and the food people turn to first.

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