

Shelby Stanger:

The presenting sponsor of this season of Wild Ideas Worth Living is Subaru. One thing I just learned that I thought was very cool, is Subaru is donating 50 Million Meals to help feed people in need during the COVID-19 crisis. They know this pandemic is devastating our country and has left hundreds of thousands out of work and unable to feed themselves or their families. Through the Subaru Love Promise, a commitment to support their communities, Subaru and their retailers across the country are making a donation to provide 50 Million Meals to Feeding America. This action, called Subaru Loves to Help, will make meals available at 199 local food banks across the country. In addition, Subaru retailers will be doing other things to help these local food banks, including food drives, donations and volunteer events. Subaru knows their ongoing support will be necessary as local communities work to get back on their feet. Subaru Loves to Help, just one part of the Subaru Love Promise, -- one more reason that makes Subaru more than a car company.

Eric Wolfinger:

Cooking is love. Cooking ultimately is for me sort of the clearest, simplest, most honest way to share love, to take care of the people you love. And it's a great creative outlet too. So I think in times, especially of uncertainty, the more we can tap into that creative side and that nurturing side, the better.

Shelby Stanger:

We don't normally think of baking bread as an adventure, but when we're stuck inside during the Covid-19 pandemic, we're finding all sorts of ways to adventure inside and in the kitchen. I don't know about you, but I've seen a ton of people starting to make artisan style bread on social media and it looks so good. So we wanted to talk to an expert to find out how you can do it too. That is once you get your hands on some flour or yeast. You might remember past guest Eric Wolfinger. Besides being a food photographer - literally he's been called the Annie Leibovitz of food photography by the New York Times - and my longtime surfing buddy, Eric Wolfinger is a baker. In his early twenties, Eric treated surf lessons for bread baking lessons at one of the most famous bakeries in the world, Tartine Bakery in San Francisco with the owner himself, Chad Robertson. The result ended up in a beautiful cookbook called Tartine Bread that in addition to being nominated for a James Beard award, also set Eric's photography career on fire. Since then, Eric's photographed over 25 cookbooks and he shoots regularly for brands like Bon Appetit, Whole Foods, Pete's Coffee, and more. Since Eric's an avid baker, I wanted to talk to him about the recent rise (ha ha get it, rise?) of home baking. Why making bread can be both adventurous and comforting and what you need to start making your own loaves at home. Eric, welcome back to Wild Ideas Worth Living. You're now in the repeat club.

Eric Wolfinger:

Thank you, Shelby. Nice to be here.

Shelby Stanger:

Let's just start with how you fell in love with baking bread.

Eric Wolfinger:

I fell in love with baking bread very unexpectedly. I was living in San Francisco and I was here to cook. I really had no interest in baking whatsoever. But after a year or so of cooking in professional kitchens, making dinners for people, I just had this idea that I wanted to learn something else. And I wound up at Tartine and when I tasted their bread, I realized I hadn't had bread like that ever in my life. And I really

fell in love with the bread. And I think what was so surprising was falling in love with the actual making of the bread.

Shelby Stanger:

So just to back up really quick, Eric traded surfing lessons with Chad, the owner of Tartine, for bread baking lessons when you're what? 20 something?

Eric Wolfinger:

20 something. 23, 24 yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

So you trade surf lessons with literally one of the top bread bakers in the world at Tartine, one of the best bread places in the world. What did you learn about bread making there?

Eric Wolfinger:

Well, I remember proposing to Chad that he had the ultimate surfing schedule and that he needed to take advantage of that and learn how to surf. And he was a little bit hesitant at first, but when I got him out into the water, what attracted him to surfing I think is what attracted me to bread so much in that surfing looks so easy from the outside, but it's really hard once you get in the water. And there's this inherent simplicity to surfing and to bread and you can have fun and be successful the very first time you go surfing and you can have fun and be successful the very first time you mix a dough, you're going to make something edible, I guarantee it. But there is almost an entire lifetime of practice and discovery with bread as there is with surfing, which is kind of counterintuitive because bread, at its most fundamental, is three ingredients. It's flour, water and salt. And how can you spend a lifetime unpacking the mysteries of flour, water, and salt? Well, maybe that's what we can talk about today. But in the same way that you're never going to be the surfer you want to be, you may never be the bread baker you want to be, but that's the whole point. That's what keeps it exciting and that's what I fell in love with.

Shelby Stanger:

And it's so cool because it seems like so many people are getting into it right now. Why do you think that is? I mean, do we all just... Some of us have some time right now.

Eric Wolfinger:

No, man, bread is good and when we're a little stressed, carbs are what we need. I don't know, I think a lot of us are finding ourselves with a little bit more time on our hands these days and I think now is a really good time actually to try your hand at something that you maybe in the back of your mind wanted to do but never really gave yourself the chance to.

Shelby Stanger:

I also think there's something just so amazing about the fact that it's just three ingredients that are so simple that can make something so awesome and you can just do it in your kitchen and that feels so good.

Eric Wolfinger:

100% yeah, that's the thing. And I think one of the main lessons that I learned from Chad. I think a lot of people are intimidated by baking in general. Like, "Oh, it's so scientific," they say because the measurements seem more precise and if you don't get the measurements right, your cake will fall or your bread won't rise, et cetera, et cetera. But what I really learned was how to bake intuitively. And obviously it's very helpful to have measurements at the outset. But what I mean by baking intuitively is I learned how to bake by feel, by observing my ingredients and their interactions and what was happening. I was able to read the dough and do what needed to be done. So I think if there's one thing that I can help people understand and feel comfortable about, it's, this is an intuitive process. It's not a scientific process in the strict sense of you're not in a chemistry lab. Sure it's scientific. You're going to make mistakes and you're going to learn from your mistakes. You're going to experiment and learn from those experiments. But this is nothing too intimidating for anybody.

Shelby Stanger:

Yeah, it's baking bread. But you come from the top of the top, but any tips for people just to get started?

Eric Wolfinger:

I mean, I didn't start at the top of the top. I remember the first day, Chad, let me into the baking room. I mean, obviously I wasn't even allowed to touch the dough. I was sweeping the floor and scrubbing baskets for a week or two, a Japanese style apprenticeship. But when I finally got my hands on the dough, it was a rude awakening. I mean, there are few things that I absolutely sucked at from the outset. And one was shaping his dough. Now again, I don't mean that to intimidate anyone because that particular dough is his crazy high hydration mind trip of a dough. I mean it's like if you want to use a surfing analogy, it's like being a beginner and given Kelly Slater's board that he was riding when he was in his late 20's. Like riding a potato chip. That's the analogy, his dough was so hard to shape, but you don't have to go that route when you start, I guess is the point.

Shelby Stanger:

We all know what it's like to be inspired by the landscape around us. And few trails stand out in North America, like the Pacific Crest Trail. With 2,650 miles, the Pacific Crest Trail provides a wide variety of terrain over its epic expanse. And when we're in front of ever-changing trails, you need your shoes to be able to step up to the challenge. It's that need for versatility that inspired Danner's new hiking shoe, the Trail 2650. Built to move quickly and confidently through the terrain you're choosing, the Trail 2650 can easily fill the role of a lightweight hiker or a trainer. For Danner, this meant looking to lightweight materials that could withstand the demands of the trail while still keeping comfort and stability in mind. Whether you're out for a day hike, going on a backpacking trip, or simply navigating some technical terrain. Feeling stable when you're hiking allows you to focus on the world around you. Whenever the timing's right to get back out there, you'll want to be ready to say yes to adventure. The Trail 2650 keeps shifting weather conditions in mind, which is why it comes with a lightweight mesh lining or a waterproof breathable Gore-Tex option. So keep your eyes focused on that next trek ahead of you knowing that the foundation you need to get out there can be found on your own two feet. The rest is up to you. To find out more and see the Trail 2650 series, visit danner.com or rei.com.

Shelby Stanger:

So, if I don't even know half of what you're talking about because I've never baked bread. Any tips for people just to get started right now with whatever they have in their kitchen? What kind of bread should we start with if we want to try it now at home? What's something easy?

Eric Wolfinger:

Something easy. So again, I said bread is flour, water and salt and you notice I left out yeast. So there's two ways to go about raising your bread. One, you can use packaged yeast, the Fleischmann's stuff, instant yeast, or you can start a sourdough starter. And you don't need a sourdough starter from your grandma. You don't need it from a famous bakery. You yourself can start it at home.

Shelby Stanger:

What is a sourdough starter? I don't even know what that means.

Eric Wolfinger:

A sourdough starter is basically flour and water mixed together that is then left to spontaneously ferment. There is yeast and bacteria all on your hands in the air on the flour itself that when given a moist warm environment will begin to ferment. And fermentation is the process of yeast eating carbohydrates and as a byproduct creating alcohol and carbon dioxide. And the carbon dioxide is what leavens the bread.

Shelby Stanger:

Okay, so you could either have the starter or you could go get yeast at the store if you can get it. And then I want to go into this a little bit more, but what if people don't have even access to yeast right now? There was one time you had been working at Tartine and you went to Peru and you stayed with this family and you basically cooked for them, but you taught them to make bread using... I don't know, obviously you didn't have yeast with use, so you just used whatever they had there.

Eric Wolfinger:

Yeah, I used Chicha, which is their local corn beer. Where a beer will cost you a buck, a pint of Chicha will cost you 5 cents. It's sort of the local brew and unlike beer which is pasteurized and is not an active fermentation anymore, the Chicha is bubbly and gurgly and if you drink too much it does some crazy things to your insides. But I had the idea that I could just mix a dough with this actively fermenting Chicha and that would leaven the dough and it did. So I didn't exactly make bread. I made pizza in a home clay oven there. So I'm not sure how it goes so far as to say you could just pour some yogurt into flour and water and it will rise. But then again, I haven't tried. But if you don't have instant yeast, I would recommend looking up the no knead bread by Jim Lahey, that is the simplest, easiest way to get your feet wet. You literally mix flour, water, salt and a little bit of yeast. Leave it alone for 24 hours and then you bake it in a Dutch oven. And the results are not amazing, but it's bread. It is bread, and it is very good. And then from there you can go a little deeper. Of course, I recommend the Tartine Bread book and I really recommend you make your own sourdough starter. And the way you do that is you mix a few spoonfuls of flour with an equal amount of water to a paste. We all remember what paste looks like from kindergarten, and you just let it sit for a few days and you'll start to see little pinhole bubbles forming. Those are the ambient yeasts that are in there. They're multiplying, they're creating a colony of yeasts and bacterias, but it's not ready to bake with yet. You need to train that starter and make it more vigorous. And so at the end of three days, you dump most of it out. Why are you dumping it out? Well the yeast have already consumed all the carbohydrates and they've got nothing left to eat. So you dump most of that out, add a few more spoonfuls of flour, equal amount of water, stir it up, let it go for another couple of days, and then you're going to see that activity probably happening even faster. And I liken keeping a starter to keeping a pet, you feed it when it's hungry. Well how do I know it's hungry? Watch it. When it rises, it's eating and it's in full health. And then when it falls and looks deflated, it's

done eating and now it's hungry again. So when it's hungry, you dump most of it out. Leaving just a little bit of the residual bits in your whatever container you're using and add a couple more spoonfuls of flour and a little bit of water and let it go again. You don't need a ton of flour and a ton of water because you're going to be throwing this stuff away while you're building the health and vigor of the starter. But this process will take a week to 10 days and after 10 days you will have a sourdough starter made by your own hands that you can make bread with.

Shelby Stanger:

And then what do you do with your starter? So you just add that then to flour, water-

Eric Wolfinger:

And salt. Yes, at first of course if you're going by my specific recipe, a few spoonfuls of flour and equal amounts of water, you're going to want to bulk that up a little bit to a larger dough. So I do recommend the Tartine recipe is online. In the New York Times it's been copied and recopied many times. It's a very good recipe. We worked really hard to make it understandable to anybody who picked up the book. We get made fun of a little bit because the recipe is 40 pages long. Most of that's photography, but I really recommend that. Honestly, people complain that it's a complicated recipe. It's complicated if you want to make the bread on the cover of the book, and that's a great goal. But for today, if you make your own starter and you make something that resembles bread and hot out of the oven with a swipe of butter, it tastes good, that's success in my book.

Shelby Stanger:

There's got to be something just so awesome about sharing some sort of bread with someone else.

Eric Wolfinger:

You know the word companion comes from the word bread. Co pan, eating bread together, eating bread together.

Shelby Stanger:

That's so interesting. So when you do your sourdough starter, where do you put it? Just on your kitchen table? I'm a little confused.

Eric Wolfinger:

In the window sill.

Shelby Stanger:

You just leave it out.

Eric Wolfinger:

You leave it out where you'll see it. And where you'll remember it. Like I mentioned before, it's sort of like a pet. You feed it when it's hungry and every day you look at it and if it's droopy and you smell it and it's really sour, super sour or a little fartsy, that means it's time to feed it again. It's as simple as that.

Shelby Stanger:

How do you think bread making is soothing? I mean especially right now, so many people are posting about how they're baking bread. How for you is it a soothing activity?

Eric Wolfinger:

I think... I mean one of the reasons why I stayed at Tartine for so long and why I loved it was I felt like I was developing a craft and I was getting better at it every day and there really is this great satisfaction in making something that you're proud of. So for me, I've come back to bread baking at home as a way to stay connected with this craft that I loved and that I devoted myself to for so long. But that's me personally. Bread is very Instagram friendly. I think that's one of the reasons why it's become so popular. I did a charcuterie book and sausage is not as Instagram friendly, so I don't know.

Shelby Stanger:

But cooking in general is so beneficial, especially in difficult times. Maybe you can just tell us a little bit about what your process is when you cook and why you like cooking.

Eric Wolfinger:

I mean, cooking is love. Cooking ultimately is for me, the clearest, simplest, most honest way to share love to take care of the people you love. And it's a great creative outlet too. So I think in times, especially of uncertainty, the more we can tap into our creative side and that nurturing side, the better.

Shelby Stanger:

Anything else you're cooking right now or you've been experimenting with that's on the easier side, besides bread?

Eric Wolfinger:

I've been roasting a lot of chickens recently, still working on that... Roasted chicken, just like a loaf of bread, seems so simple. But if you want every element perfect, you've got to consider every detail. I've got a pot of bolognese gurgling on the stove right now. I'm going to have pasta and bolognese this evening. I'm really into, I got this little Japanese binchotan grill and I'm really into sitting at the table and grilling at the table outdoors. But that's super fun. Just maybe Korean style ribs over rice, sesame seeds, flaky salt.

Shelby Stanger:

You've done 25 cookbooks. You've tried all sorts of cooking. In times like this, you said you go to chicken, roasted chicken. What else do you go to?

Eric Wolfinger:

So I did this book on Japanese clay pot cooking called donabe, and that is a very home-style Japanese cooking tradition. This is not sushi here. This is comforting, simple, easy food. And the revelation for me was basically the process of cooking with a donabe is you put the food into this clay pot, turn on the heat and let the donabe do the work. And obviously the authors whom I worked with, Naoko Moore and Kyle Connaughton are very good cooks and the recipes are impeccably written and if you follow them to the letter, like all you do is follow the recipe to the letter, put the food in this clay pot and turn on the heat and the results are... I mean it's a thousand thread count feather duvet how comforting that food is. It's just like, "Oh." So I've been using my donabe a lot.

Shelby Stanger:

Is there anything people can do right now with just the ingredients they have in their kitchen? I would say a lot of people have rice, beans, peanut butter and pasta.

Eric Wolfinger:

Go. Rice, beans, peanut butter, pasta, go.

Shelby Stanger:

I'm just looking at what we have. We have rice, beans, peanut butter, pasta. We have almond butter and-

Eric Wolfinger:

Well you're a vegan. You don't eat meat, do you?

Shelby Stanger:

I do. I started eating salmon recently. I feel a little better, but I do experiment with plant based eating and my honey is plant based, 100%.

Eric Wolfinger:

I think Mexican food and Thai food can lend themselves to taking those very simple basics with a few spices or herbs that you have on hand or maybe can find in your neighbor's front yard and throw something together.

Shelby Stanger:

That sounds like basically every meal, rice, beans, some salsa, and cilantro, and I think avocado.

Eric Wolfinger:

Yeah, exactly. Or take that peanut butter, mix it with a little bit of honey, a clove of garlic, if you have fish sauce, groovy. And all of a sudden you've got the most epic Thai peanut dipping sauce for whatever you may have on hand or just eat that over rice.

Shelby Stanger:

I love it. Eric, your guy who just loves life and grabs it full on two hands and you run. What brings you joy?

Eric Wolfinger:

Right now, what's bringing me joy is being at home with my family, maybe sounds a little cliché for this episode, but it's cooking good food for my family is what's really bringing me hardcore joy.

Shelby Stanger:

And Eric, you have a newborn so you've been pretty much in quarantine anyway.

Eric Wolfinger:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, and when I say family, I mean yes. I mean my partner, my ride or die and my newborn baby. Well he's a year, he's a year in change now and is just now today standing up on his own.

Shelby Stanger:

Congratulations.

Eric Wolfinger:

This quarantine social distancing is kind of my second paternity leave, which I'm spending cooking, cleaning and hanging out at home.

Shelby Stanger:

If you're spending your time at home these days like you should be, but you're ready to take on an adventure in the kitchen, here's how to start. Head to our show notes to find the yeast based, no need bread recipe that Eric recommended plus some other recipes and cookbooks he talked about in the episode. Make your own starter or you can see if your neighbor has some and you could pick it up from their front doorstep, contact free, then feed it regularly and try to make your own bread at home. Now is also a great time to try out a recipe you're intimidated by or that takes a good portion of the day like cooking a pot of beans, making pasta bolognese, or baking a fresh pie. Try making a recipe without the exact ingredients. I mean that's always an adventure when you try making swaps or you cook by feel like Eric does.

Shelby Stanger:

Thanks again to Eric Wolfinger for sharing some of the science and technique behind bread baking. You can see Eric's work at ericwolfinger.com and on Instagram @EricWolfinger. That's E-R-I-C W-O-L-F-I-N-G-E-R. And Eric, I can't wait until we get to go surfing together again. If this podcast inspires you to experiment in the kitchen, share your adventures. I really want to see what you're cooking and maybe it'll inspire someone else to go on a little adventure in their own home. Special shout out to everyone helping in the Covid-19 pandemic. To all you service workers, grocery store workers, healthcare professionals, law enforcement, parents, teachers, the list is endless and it includes even you listening now for doing your part. We're all in this together, so thank you so much and stay safe. Wild Ideas Worth Living is part of the REI podcast network. It's hosted by me, I'm Shelby Stanger and it's written and edited by Annie Fassler and produced by Chelsea Davis. Our executive producers are Paolo Mottola and Joe Crosby, and our presenting sponsor is Subaru. As always, we appreciate when you subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you listen. I'd really like to see some funny Covid-19 pandemic reviews while you're listening in quarantine. And remember right now the best way to live wildly is by staying safe, sending hugs to you all.