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Recognizing the Therapeutic Value of Baking During the Pandemic

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Recognizing the Therapeutic Value of Baking During the Pandemic

By Camille Dolan
UCF Forum columnist
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It was to easier to avoid the grim news from the outside world when my inside world smelled like vanilla and cinnamon.



We are all returning to campus soon. There will be adjustments, of course, just like when we had to adjust to working from home.

In the beginning, it felt weird to be sitting in front of my computer with my pajamas on, doing actual work. It almost felt like working from home wasn't enough.

Have you wondered if you accomplished enough during the pandemic?

Maybe in the past year or so you've been too consumed by what's going on in the world to think about such things. That's OK. Maybe, like me, you've worried you haven't done enough. That's OK, too.

The past year has been strange and scary, and although bad things have happened, we have a lot to look forward to.

I am here to tell you that you don't have to worry anymore. The past year has been strange and scary, and although bad things have happened, we have a lot to look forward to.

I look forward to more baking.

I sat in front of my screens and not even once did I attempt chair yoga, to learn a new language or acquire a new hobby. I did not create a video that went viral.

I wanted to do something useful or inspiring or meaningful.

So I baked.

My first pandemic loaf was an Irish soda bread, studded with raisins and toasty oats. I accessorized the whole outfit with Irish butter, and it was trending for a short time in my house.

Baking has never let me down. If I follow the instructions and pay attention to the timing and the science, I am rewarded with carbohydrate yumminess. If something goes wrong along the way, it's not baking's fault, it's my own.

Sometimes, though, even if everything goes right, maybe it wasn't meant to be.

I was craving bagels. Fresh, chewy bagels. I had made them once before, and they had been a disaster. Primed and giddy from my soda bread experience, I tried again.

They came out better than I had expected, better than a bagel shop's, dare I say. But I wouldn't recommend trying this at home. They were labor intensive. Aside from the dough, there's the proving/proofing, the shaping, and then the dunking into acidulated water for no more than two minutes. And then, finally, the egg wash and baking process. And the whole time, you wonder if the four hours you spent is going to result in goodness or something not so good.

Making bagels was hard. It got me out of my comfort zone, though, and reminded me what a comfort zone was for. Why would I want to go from my comfort zone into my uncomfortable zone?

You know what else is comforting? Cookies. I had acquired some chocolate chips (along with several bags of chips of another species – I blame internet ordering) and decided it would be prudent to turn them into cookies. I happened to have extra butter and flour,

so why not? By throwing a few ingredients together and creating something, I feel like I am improving – at least temporarily – my small corner of the world.

My family enjoyed my baked goods during the pandemic, but they may not have understood the therapeutic value behind them.

It was hard for me to dwell on the increasingly grim news from the outside world when my inside world smelled like vanilla and cinnamon.

But now, as we head back to campus, I look forward to sharing my heightened baking expertise with my colleagues. In the past, whenever I brought in homemade banana bread and left it in our communal kitchen, it would quickly disappear.

Banana bread will still be in the rotation, but I have expanded my playlist. My department, pre-pandemic, was famous for our holiday potlucks. I hope we can safely continue this tradition; I imagine some of my colleagues are also eager to show off their new skills honed by the past 16 months.

I also hope one of them brings some bagels.

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