Toasty Panetteria

A Loaf under the Cover

Cato's Kneaded Bread, Libum and Placenta

An excerpt from *Forgotten Loaves*

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About this excerpt

This selection brings together two chapters from *Forgotten Loaves: Breads and Bakers of the Ancient World and Beyond*, the second Toasty Panetteria volume. It follows Cato's instructions for kneaded bread and two cheese-rich preparations. The accompanying recipes bring the kneaded loaf and cheese preparations into a modern kitchen.

The selection includes the modern recipes placed within these chapters. The four recipes in this selection have been tested by the author. Their origin notes identify the adaptations.

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CHAPTER 1

A loaf under the cover

Roman Italy · Cato's *On Agriculture*, section 74

Wash your hands and the bowl. Add water to the meal gradually, knead, shape and cook beneath a cover. Cato's instruction for *panis depsticius*, kneaded bread, takes only a few lines.[1;2]

The brevity is part of its appeal. There is a complete process here, beginning with an ingredient and ending with something to eat. It is also a process that expects the maker to know what to do between the words.

How much water? Enough to make the mixture workable. How much kneading? Enough to bring it together properly. The written instruction can be short because experience supplies the detail.

Knowledge in the hands

A water weight is useful in a modern recipe. It gives the next baker somewhere to start. At the bowl, the flour still has to take it up, and the mixture still has to be worked into a suitable condition. Bran, milling and time all affect what the hands encounter.

Cato's gradual addition keeps the judgement with the maker. Dry pieces need bringing into the mass; damp meal begins to hold together; the result becomes something that can be shaped. The action is ordinary enough to describe in a word, but learning to do it well takes repetition.

This is how a great deal of food knowledge can remain unwritten. An experienced person sees the state of the mixture and knows the next action. A learner may need a demonstration. A much later reader, left with only the instruction, has to work out which parts of that shared knowledge have gone missing.

The attraction of this little recipe is therefore larger than its ingredient list. It preserves a sequence that makes sense to a baker while reminding us how much a recipe relies on its reader.

Read the recipe backwards

Cato's directions become longer if we begin at their first instruction and work outwards. The bowl has to be available and worth cleaning. Water must be brought to it. Meal means grain has already passed through preparation and grinding. Cooking beneath a cover assumes that the hearth and fuel can be made ready.

Each of those conditions sits outside the brief method while making the method possible. A recipe is often a boundary drawn around part of the work. Its apparent simplicity depends on where that boundary falls.

For a modern baker, the division is especially clear. We can buy flour, use water from a tap and set a temperature on an oven. The recipe can begin at the mixing stage because several supply systems are already in place. Cato's reader had a different set of arrangements to rely upon, but the short instruction similarly starts from resources being available.

The gradual water addition is the part that survives particularly well across that distance. It is an instruction to observe. The maker can see dry material becoming damp, feel resistance change and stop before the mixture becomes unmanageable. It gives a method for reaching a condition without supplying a numerical answer.

The same habit is worth keeping beside a modern weight. Begin with the lower water quantity, let the flour take it up, then decide whether more is useful. A written range gives the hands room to work. Recording the final amount makes the next attempt easier without pretending that every bag of flour will behave alike.

The two recipes offer different outcomes from that starting point. The plain round is close-textured and belongs beside a meal. The yeasted loaf gives a lighter result and takes longer. Make either with its intended texture in mind. The most instructive comparison may be the reason you would choose one for a particular evening, as much as the difference in the slices.

An oven around one loaf

The *testum* encloses the bread at the hearth. Heat has to be arranged around the food, including above it. Andrew Dalby's translation notes describe the ancient cover and distinguish it from the modern covered casserole used in some adaptations.[3]

An enclosure changes the baker's work. It gives the loaf a small cooking space, but hides it from view. The maker has to judge when to inspect it and how to manage the heat around it. The equipment and the method belong together.

That is a useful contrast with the Egyptian workshop. There the model shows people and ovens organised around repeated production. Here the cooking arrangement is brought close around a single preparation. Bread-making can operate at either scale, provided the maker can bring the mixture and heat together successfully.

The first recipe below follows the flour-and-water preparation. The second uses yeast for a lighter modern loaf. Both use a domestic oven and lidded pot, giving the cover a practical place in our own baking.

The estate outside the bowl

Cato's book concerns the management of an estate in a society that used enslaved labour. Its instructions arrive from a position of authority over resources and work.[2] The inviting simplicity of the loaf sits inside that larger arrangement.

Whoever ate it need not have cleaned the grain or carried the fuel. The short method begins after much of the labour has already been done. A tidy recipe can make that distance easy to overlook.

The distinction matters because bread is so good at suggesting comfort. A warm loaf may be welcome to its eater while its making belongs to an exhausting or coerced day's work. Both are part of its history.

In this chapter, the bowl gives us a close view of skill; the estate gives that skill a social setting. Neither needs to displace the other. The bread was made by somebody, under conditions that helped decide what their day could be.

Kneaded bread after Cato

Makes: 1 low round

About 1.5–2 hours, including cooling · Bowl and oven-safe lidded pot

Flour, water, kneading and a cover: Cato's short instruction becomes a compact bread to tear beside a meal. Expect a close texture rather than a risen crumb.

Ingredient	Quantity
Wholemeal wheat flour	300 g
Water	170–195 g

1. Put the flour in a clean bowl. Add 170 g water gradually, working it through the meal. Add more, a little at a time, until all the flour joins a firm, workable dough.
2. Knead for about 8 minutes. Cover and rest for 20 minutes, then knead briefly until even.
3. Heat the oven to 220 °C. Press the dough into a low round about 18 cm across and 1.5–2 cm thick.
4. Place it on baking paper in a room-temperature lidded pot, following the cookware's instructions. The pot, lid, handles and paper must be rated for the heat.
5. Cover and bake for about 30 minutes. Remove the lid carefully and continue for 10–15 minutes, until the surface is set and the centre is cooked through. A cut piece should have no wet flour paste inside.
6. Cool for at least 20 minutes before breaking or slicing.

Give it a meal

Try small pieces with soup, cooked vegetables or cheese. The plain, close-textured bread is easier to appreciate with something alongside it.

A modern oven adaptation of Cato, section 74. Flour and water follow the instruction; quantities, thickness, resting time and oven settings are modern choices. Contains wheat.

A small covered wheat loaf

Makes: 1 small loaf

About 3–4 hours, plus cooling · Small oven-safe lidded pot

A lid makes a little baking chamber around the dough. This modern yeasted loaf brings that idea into a domestic oven.

Ingredient	Quantity
Strong white wheat flour	300 g
Water	210 g
Fine salt	6 g
Instant yeast	2 g

1. Mix everything until no dry flour remains. Rest for 15 minutes, then knead for about 5 minutes. Cover and leave for 60–90 minutes, until expanded and aerated, folding once halfway through.
2. Shape a round on a lightly floured surface. Set it on baking paper in a bowl, cover and leave for 45–75 minutes, until puffy. A light indentation should return slowly.
3. Heat the oven to 230 °C. Use a room-temperature pot unless its manufacturer's instructions require another method. The pot, lid, handles and paper must all be rated for the temperature.
4. Lift the dough into the pot with the paper and make one shallow cut on top. Cover and bake for 25 minutes.
5. Remove the lid carefully, keeping clear of the steam. Reduce to 210 °C and bake for 15–20 minutes more, until browned and set, with the centre around 96–98 °C.
6. Cool on a rack for at least an hour.

A useful comparison

On another day, make the same dough uncovered in the same pot, following the cookware's guidance. Keep the loaf size and oven settings alike, then compare the crusts.

A modern enclosed bake accompanying Cato's cooking cover. The yeast, flour and pot method are modern choices. Contains wheat.

CHAPTER 2

Cheese belongs at the bread table

Roman Italy · Cato's *libum* and *placenta*

Two pounds of cheese is an excellent way to get my attention. That is where Cato begins *libum*. A pound of flour follows, or half a pound of finer flour for a more delicate result, then an egg. The mixture is formed, placed on leaves and cooked gently beneath a cover.[2]

The cheese is plainly doing more than adding a little flavour. It is central to the mixture, and the alternative flour quantity changes its balance considerably. This is a food to approach with different expectations from a lean wheat loaf.

Beside it, Cato places *placenta*: a layered preparation with cheese and honey. One is gathered into a loaf; the other is assembled. A familiar set of ingredients can support very different kinds of work.

Let the cheese do its job

A fresh cheese brings water as well as richness. Some holds its shape; some spreads. Draining alters the mixture before the flour goes in, so the condition of the cheese matters as much as its weight.

The temptation, faced with a soft mass, is to add flour until it behaves like a familiar dough. That may make shaping easier. It also moves the food away from the cheese-rich character that made the recipe interesting.

Libum asks us to accept another kind of bread. A low round can be tender and useful without producing a tall slice. There is no particular prize for making every mixture stretch.

The ricotta recipe below keeps the cheese prominent and uses four small rounds, which are convenient for a first bake. Its modern quantities and

tray-baking method adapt the older preparation for a domestic kitchen. Let the rounds settle briefly before eating: warm and fully cooled, they give different impressions of the same mixture.

The work of layers

Placenta spreads the task across more space and time. Cato describes soaked groats worked with flour into *tracta*, prepared pieces that are dried and oiled. A separate crust supports the assembly. Fresh sheep's cheese is soaked, squeezed, smoothed and mixed with honey; the components are then arranged in layers and cooked under a heated cover.[2]

An ingredient list would miss most of what makes this food. The pieces have to be ready, the filling has to have the right consistency, and assembly has to happen in an order that works. The cook is managing several preparations before the final food reaches the heat.

That organisation is part of the skill. The Egyptian workshop showed it distributed among people; here a recipe shows it distributed across tasks. In either case, the finished portion conceals work that had to happen at the right time.

The honeyed cheese pie after the libum recipe uses bought filo as a modern shortcut. Filo gives us manageable layers, while the filling keeps cheese and honey at the centre. It is a way to enjoy the combination and understand assembly without beginning with the full preparation of Cato's tracta.

The mixture and the assembly

Set the two methods beside each other and watch where the effort goes. Libum asks the maker to bring ingredients into one mass. Placenta asks for components whose differences have to survive being put together. One depends on a mixture; the other on an arrangement.

That makes the cheese's condition important in two ways. In a small round it contributes to whether the mass can be formed and holds after cooking. Between layers it must spread without making the whole preparation impossible to handle. The same ingredient has another practical role because the food's structure has changed.

Cato's preparation of the cheese is consequently part of the recipe's logic. Soaking, squeezing and working it smooth take time, but they produce a component suited to the task ahead.[2] The final weight cannot describe all of that condition. Two cheeses can weigh the same and bring quite different amounts of free moisture to a bowl.

The sequence of tasks matters just as much. A component prepared too late holds up assembly; one prepared early must remain usable while the next is made. A layered food is an exercise in keeping several things ready at once. That is a skill even when nobody calls it one.

The modern filo version deliberately makes one of those stages convenient. Bought sheets arrive already thin and manageable, letting a first attempt concentrate on the filling and assembly. The shortcut changes the labour, and the origin note names it. It also makes the historical division of work more visible: the easy packet occupies the place of a preparation that once required attention of its own.

Plainness and plenty

Cato's kneaded bread, libum and placenta sit close together in the same book. They give us a plain preparation, a cheese-rich mixture and a more elaborate layered food. That variety is more revealing than a story in which simple bread gradually becomes sophisticated.

People can want different foods for different purposes at the same time. A quick preparation may be exactly right for one meal. Another may justify the effort of layers and a richer filling. Complexity tells us about the work, but usefulness depends on the occasion.

These recipes also show how poorly our categories can fit an older table. Bread, cake and pastry may all seem plausible labels at different moments. What remains clear is the handling: flour gathering a cheese mixture, or prepared sheets supporting a filling.

Libum: little fresh-cheese loaves

Makes: 4 small rounds

About 55 minutes, plus draining · Sieve, bowl and baking tray

Let these remain cheese-rich and soft. They are good warm, after a short rest, with a little honey served separately if you like.

Ingredient	Quantity
Ricotta, weighed after draining	250 g
Plain wheat flour	75 g
Medium egg	1
Fine salt, depending on the cheese	up to 2 g
Honey, optional, to serve	a little

1. If the ricotta is wet, drain it in a sieve in the refrigerator before weighing. Heat the oven to 180 °C and line a baking tray.
2. Mash the cheese, beat in the egg, then mix in the flour and salt. The mixture should be soft enough to scoop.
3. Divide into four portions. With damp hands, make low rounds about 8 cm across and 2 cm thick, leaving space between them.
4. Bake for 25–35 minutes, until lightly coloured and set in the centre. The middle should reach at least 75 °C and have a cohesive cooked texture.
5. Leave for 10 minutes before eating. Refrigerate leftovers promptly once cooled.

Keep the cheese in charge

Extra flour may make shaping easier but will also change the food. Damp hands and a spoon are more useful than trying to turn the mixture into a stretchy dough.

Adapted from Cato, section 75, with modern ricotta, adjusted proportions and a tray bake. Optional serving honey is a modern addition. Contains milk, egg and wheat.

Honeyed cheese layers

Makes: 6 portions

About 1 hour, plus draining · Shallow 20 cm round baking dish

Cato's placenta builds cheese and honey between prepared layers. Here, bought filo makes the assembly manageable for a modern kitchen.

Ingredient	Quantity
Ricotta, weighed after draining	400 g
Honey, plus a little to finish	80 g
Filo pastry	6 large sheets
Olive oil	30 g
Fine salt	a small pinch

1. Drain wet ricotta in the refrigerator before weighing. Heat the oven to 180 °C. Lightly oil the dish and mix the ricotta with the honey and salt.
2. Keep the filo covered with a barely damp clean cloth while working. Brush two sheets lightly with oil and overlap them in the dish, letting the edges hang over.
3. Spread half the cheese mixture over the base. Fold or trim two more sheets to fit the dish, brushing lightly with oil as you lay them over the filling.
4. Add the remaining cheese, then the final two lightly oiled sheets. Fold the overhanging edges inwards and brush the top with any remaining oil.
5. Bake for 35–45 minutes, until the pastry is golden and crisp and the filling is hot through. If the top colours early, cover it loosely with foil.
6. Rest for 15 minutes. Finish with a little honey and cut into portions. Refrigerate cooled leftovers promptly.

The point of the layers

Keep the filling in two distinct layers rather than mixing everything together. A cut portion should show how the whole food was assembled.

An original modern interpretation of the cheese-and-honey assembly in Cato, section 76. Bought filo replaces the ancient crust and tracta. Contains milk and wheat; check the pastry label for other allergens.

A note on the sources

Cato's *On Agriculture* is located here by sections 74–76, using the online Loeb translation, the Latin text for section 74 and the accessible Dalby excerpt. The account keeps the ancient cooking cover distinct from modern cookware. The reference to volume one supplies series context, rather than evidence for ancient origins. References below identify the works actually cited in these chapters.

Bibliography

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[2] Marcus Porcius Cato. *On Agriculture*. Harvard University Press, 1934. URL https://penelope.uchicago.edu/thayer/e/roman/texts/cato/de_agricultura/e%2A.html. Translated by William Davis Hooper and Harrison Boyd Ash. Sections 74–76; online Loeb translation at LacusCurtius.

[3] Marcus Porcius Cato. On farming: bread and cakes, sections 74–76 and translator's notes. Translation by Andrew Dalby; excerpt hosted in MIT course materials, 1998. URL https://stuff.mit.edu/afs/athena/course/21/21h.302/www/local/cato_de.agr.pt.2.pdf. Accessible excerpt consulted. Notes distinguish the ancient testum from a modern covered casserole.