Bread: Staff of Dutch Life in the Old and New World

Peter G. Rose

Bread was the mainstay of the Dutch diet in the seventeenth century. It was consumed with butter or cheese for breakfast, paired with meat or hutsapot (a one-pot dish of meats and vegetables) for the midday main meal, and served with, or as part of, the porridge at night. Baked goods accompanied the human life cycle, from the ruskins with comfits served for celebrations of a birth to funeral biscuits served at the time of a death. Bread and koek (gingerbread-style cake or flat hard cake)—then and now, prominent items in Dutch food consumption—were brought to the New World, where they assumed a similar position in the diet of Dutch settlers and their descendants.

The detailed record books of the Amsterdam Municipal Orphanage provide an insight into bread consumption of the poor (the orphans) and of the lower middle class (the staff). Ann McGants, in her analysis of the diet of the burgher orphans in Amsterdam, finds that the bread ration in the years 1639 to 1699 fluctuates between ten and eleven ounces per day per orphan and averages about ten and a half ounces of bread daily. Indeed, “bread occupied a prominent place in the daily diet of the Burgerweeshuis” and accompanied nearly every meal, as excerpts from the orphan menu for 1640 in the same publication show:

Sunday noon: beans with a piece of bread; salted or smoked meat with a piece of bread
Sunday evening: whole milk with rice made into a porridge
Tuesday noon: white beans with butter and with a piece of bread; smoked or salted bacon with carrots, turnip, or cabbage and bread Tuesday evening: buttermilk with rye bread
Thursday noon: beans with a piece of bread; salted or smoked meat and bread
Thursday evening: buttermilk with wheat bread cooked together

In a contemporary painting that still hangs in the building where the orphanage was housed, now the Amsterdam Historical Museum, we see the orphans at an evening meal for which such a porridge is served, along with dark, whole-grain bread. Bread not only had a major place in the orphans’ meals; it was also the mainstay in poor children’s fare elsewhere in Holland. A. Th. van Deursen asserts that a poor family with two young children in the rural part of Holland, where they would eat little else but bread, would eat about five pounds of rye bread a day. If we assume that the children would eat less than a pound each, the adults would have about a pound and a half or a little more per person.

Janny Venema has investigated the care of the poor in Beverwijck, now Albany, circa 1650–1700 by the deacons of the First Reformed Church. The deacons decided each case individually. Sometimes the poor received monthly cash allotments; sometimes they were helped by providing them with a piece of land for growing their food or with a cow; and at other times they received food outright. Between 1652 and 1700 more than 850 bushels of wheat, 265 bushels of corn, and 60 bushels of peas were given to the poor. And bakers, such as Jochem Wessels, Wouter Albertsen, and several others, baked bread
specifically for the poor. According to the deacons’ records, the poor were always given wheat bread, which cost 14 stuivers between 1656 and 1658 for an eight-pound loaf, because wheat was the main grain of the Beverwijck area. We may conclude that care for the poor and orphans took place in the New World in the same painstaking manner as is evident from the records of the Municipal Orphanage in Amsterdam.

The orphanage records also give us a good idea of the bread consumption of the working class. Coarse and fine wheat bread was reserved for the staff. McGants found that the staff ate a diet remarkably similar to that of the orphans, except for quality and quantity: at least ten pounds of wheat and four and a half pounds of rye bread per week, in addition to goodly quantities of other foods. This generosity leads her to speculate that some of the bread was meant to be shared with family members or was sold by the staff on the side. However, since the Dutch have always been known as big eaters, the staff may have eaten most of the food due to them.

Another source of information on bread consumption of the working class is an ordinance of 1647 in New Amsterdam. This document sets the weekly ration for the West India Company ships as follows: “stew according to circumstances; 3½ pounds of hard tack [twice-baked sea biscuits, which keep for months, even years]; 1½ gills of vinegar; 1 pound of dried fish; and 2½ pounds of pork or beef.” These rations conform more or less to those of the East India Company.

While in the Netherlands, the working class ate rye or coarse wheat bread; daily consumption of white bread was seen as a symbol of affluence. The well-to-do burgher class continued the same plain-but-plenty meal pattern of the orphanage staff but showed off its wealth in the different kinds of white breads on their tables, which accompanied fruit, perhaps from their gardens, as well as fowl or meat for a frugal but ample dinner. These rich burghers often built themselves country homes, where they had beautiful gardens full of not only fruit bushes and trees and vegetables but also the newest exotic plants brought in from faraway lands. They grew all sorts of produce for their immediate use. Recipes for these vegetables were provided by De Verstandige Kock (The Sensible Cook), acknowledged as the definitive Dutch cookbook of the seventeenth century and meant for owners of such houses. Portrayed on its frontispiece is a kitchen in such a wealthy home. On the right is a large bake oven, being heated for the baking of raised pies, which are readied in the foreground. We may assume that various kinds of white bread were baked in that oven, as well.

Native Americans in New Netherland liked the wheat bread of the Dutch. Wheat had been unknown to them, and the bread made from it had a very different texture and taste from the boiled corn bread that was a staple in their diet. Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert relates in his diary of 1634–1635 that when he was more than a day’s walk away from Fort Orange, an Indian who had just come from the fort offered him a piece of wheat bread. An ordinance for Fort Orange and the village of Beverwijck gives a clear picture of the impact of the Indians’ fondness for Dutch bread on life in the Dutch communities in New Netherland. The baking for trade purposes made flour scarce, because the bakers preferred to prepare baked goods for the Indians, which was more profitable, to baking regularly (twice a week) for the settlers’ community. The ordinance reads:
Having heard the manifold complaints of the scarcity of coarse bread which the bakers, contrary to the ordinance...of 6th of October Anno 1659, do not bake twice a week, ...consuming, to the serious prejudice of the community, their flour in baking Koeckjens [cookies] and white bread for the Indians, without [standard] weight...every one who follows the trade of baking shall from this time forth twice a week bake coarse bread for the accommodation of the community...

The four basic ingredients of bread are grain, leavening, salt, and water. While bread subtly differs from day to day depending on outside temperature and circumstance—even the mood of the baker—its main ingredients of grain or flour, liquid, and leavening remain constant. Rye and wheat were the two main grains used for bread in the seventeenth-century in the Netherlands. Rye bread in the north was darker and sweeter, while that in the south—below the great rivers of Rhine, Meuse, and Waal—was lighter in color and consistency. Wheat produces a lighter bread with a softer crumb than rye. When properly bolted (finely sifted), a fine-textured white bread is obtained.

The western provinces of Holland with their wet clay grounds were not particularly suitable for the growing of grain and instead were used for grazing and horticulture. By the seventeenth century, bread grain imported from the Baltic states and Amsterdam had become an important transit market. In the first half of the seventeenth century, 50,000 last (roughly 120,000 tons) of grain were brought to Amsterdam, where they were traded. The prices set in Amsterdam influenced those in other, less-important regional markets. Most of the grain was used to feed the local population, and the rest was traded to France, northern Spain, and Portugal. Some wheat was grown locally; the province of Zeeland had been known since the Middle Ages for the quality of its wheat. The drier eastern provinces of Drente, Overijssel, Gelderland, and the southern provinces of Brabant and Limburg grew mostly rye, which requires less moisture and ripens earlier than wheat. A study of the agricultural productivity of Rensselaerswijck by Jan Folkerts shows that from 1642 through 1646 the main crops were oats and wheat: “The prices of wheat and oats generally were in the ratio of 5 to 2, so in fact wheat was the leading crop in the patroonship.” He points out that while the Netherlands had become dependent upon the Baltic region for its grain, “in the American colony a one-sided directedness towards the cultivation of grain” is seen.

In the Dutch cities the baker purchased his grain from the grain trader and stored it in his attic. The rural baker would buy directly from the grower, a practice that was followed in New Netherland. There, as in the Netherlands, grain was ground at a mill as needed for a milling fee set by the local government. An early privilege granted to the city of Haarlem in 1274 by Floris V mentions the standard grain mill, which can be turned as needed in the changeable winds of Holland. In Cryn Fredericksz’s city plan of New Amsterdam, dating from around 1626 and the earliest known, a mill is already present, and a mill is also shown in the same location on the 1655 Visscher map.

What we now know as the sourdough method was the early way of leavening bread. A portion of a previous dough was set aside to ferment and used to leaven the next batch. A natural by-product of beer brewing is yeast, and brewer’s yeast was used for bread baking in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands. The same method was probably followed in New Netherland. According to an Amsterdam ordinance of 1652, the yeast for bread baking had to be unadulterated, just the way it came from the
brewery, and measured with a verified and approved measure. In Leiden in the middle
of the seventeenth century, yeast was sold in a *gist-huis*, or “yeast-storage house,” but
numerous petitions made clear that the bakers preferred to obtain their yeast directly from
the brewery. 

Salt is found in some places on earth close to the surface and can simply be dug
up. Salt can also be obtained through natural evaporation of sea water. The Netherlands do
not have salt deposits readily available, and the climate is not conducive to the evaporation
method; therefore, another way of obtaining salt—so important to food preservation and
preparation—was devised. In the medieval province of Zeeland, the salty peat bogs were
dug, dried, and then burned. The resulting *zel-as*, or salty ash, was mixed with sea water,
and the salt was extracted by boiling down the mixture. By the sixteenth century rough salt
was imported from France and Spain and refined in Zeeland. During the Eighty Years’
War, Spain tried to curtail the salt trade, and the Dutch needed to go farther afield to
obtain the precious commodity. By 1622 the West India Company had a salt monopoly in
the Caribbean at Punta de Araya. Its loss to the Spaniards caused the Dutch to mount an
expedition to seize Bonaire, St. Eustacius, and Curacao; both the Netherlands and New
Netherlands were then supplied with the salt from these islands.

The water used in bread must be wholesome. However, water in the canals of
Amsterdam was so polluted that beer brewers employed ice-breaking boats during the
winter so water boats could get through to the river Vecht in order to obtain clean
water. Recipes in *The Sensible Cook* sometimes specify the kind of water to be used,
such as “cold rain water.” Undoubtedly, bakers made similar efforts to ensure pure water
for their doughs. In New Netherlands the situation was different, as no tanners, dyers,
fullers, paper makers, or glue makers had yet polluted the waters. Adriaen van der Donck
sings the praises of streams from which the water may be drunk without danger even in
the hottest weather.

Not quite as simple as his four basic ingredients are the baker’s tools. Most
important among them is the cavernous wall oven, stoked by *takkenbessen*, fagots or reeds
used to create the lively fire necessary to heat the bricks. A petition of the Leiden bakers’
guild of 1685 asks to be allowed to burn reeds, peat, or sawdust and buckwheat shells.
Attached to this petition is a resolution that allows the burning of reeds on certain
conditions. In New Netherland fuel was not this scarce. Van der Donck reports how
the new country’s giant oak trees, sixty to seventy feet high, were not only used for all
sorts of farming purposes but also made “excellent firewood, surpassing every other kind.”
The baker’s implements included an ash rake to rake out the fire prior to baking, a mop to
clean out the ashes, an ash pot to keep the hot coals, a grain shovel, sieves, a trough for
mixing and kneading, a table for shaping, a scale for weighing the dough pieces, boards
and cloths for rising, baking sheets for small breads and rolls, and a peel to “shoot” the
dough pieces into the oven.

The bakery shops were but a simple extension of the workroom, sometimes no
more than a window to the street. In his workroom the baker mixed the flour, salt, yeast,
and water into a dough, which was then kneaded to the right consistency. Wheat doughs
were kneaded by hand; the heavier rye doughs were kneaded in a trough with the feet
while the person doing the kneading would hang onto a rail affixed above the trough.
Hands or feet were not allowed to be washed with soap but were cleaned with hot water
and then rubbed with flour.
Seventeenth-century Dutch art provides pictorial proof of the large assortment of breads, which varied in shape, size, weight, filling, and ornamentation and often differed from town to town or region to region not only in shape but also in name. The common shape of the utilitarian bread was the round-balled floor bread; baked on the floor of the oven, it could be either coarse or white bread. These breads were also made in rectangles or squares, depending on the region. White breads were also shaped in a variety of forms and sizes, as illustrated in Jan Steen’s painting Leiden Baker Arend Oostwaert and His Wife Catharina Keyzerswaert. As shown in Baker Oostwaert’s assortment we find displayed on the left and held by the baker’s wife zotinnenkoeken, a baked good akin to rusks. Leaning against the wall is a duivekater, a fine white bread, baked for the holidays of St. Nicholas Day on December 6 through Epiphany on January 6 but apparently also for Easter. Hanging above it on their typical rack are pretzels and below them schootjes, portioned dough strips baked together, often shaped in a form that looks somewhat like an ice-cube tray. Behind the baker is a display of baljes, small round breads baked together, like little heads held together by their hals, or neck, hence the name. In other works of art we often encounter baskets with rolls of various sizes and shapes, some plain, others filled with currants or raisins, and as in the Baker Oostwaert painting, pretzels displayed on their typical rack are featured dominantly. In a 1753 booklet for koekbakers (bakers) and their apprentices, an early guide for the profession, a recipe for pretzels calls for a pound each of wheat flour and sugar, fourteen grams of cinnamon, fifty-two grams of butter, and a bit of potash. Together with eggs, the ingredients are made into a dough, which is divided into pieces of forty-two grams each. These are baked on a buttered baking sheet. They are similar in shape but not in taste to the salty pretzels now sold on the streets of New York City. Pretzels were baked in New Netherland, as well: bakers petitioned the court of Fort Orange on March 4, 1653, requesting mitigation of the ordinance against baking white bread, pretzels, and cookies for the Indians.

Some breads, particularly duivekaters (holiday breads), were decorated with patacons, earthenware disks, generally painted with either biblical or worldly images, pre-baked, and baked again onto the bread as decorations. Small and larger patacons were used between the sixteenth and eighteenth century in the Netherlands (mostly in the south) and far longer in Flanders. Recently some were found in a garden of a house in Deventer in the eastern Netherlands. One might think of them as little gifts, similar to the way a ring or toy is placed in a Cracker Jack box or a paper parasol garnishes a drink in a restaurant: they remain after the treat is consumed. Duivekaters were baked in the New World, as well, and given to the poor at holiday time. We do not know whether they were decorated with patacons.

Breads were often flavored with the spices brought by the East India Company to Dutch shores, such as nutmeg, cloves, and especially cinnamon, and they were filled with “sweetmeats,” such as currants or raisins. New Netherland ordinances forbidding the baking for the Indians in time of grain scarcity often specifically mention breads with sweetmeats. An Amsterdam ordinance from as early as 1601 forbids excessive ornamentation with, for example, gold, which was probably gold leaf. The ordinance explains that such ornamental breads displayed in the baker’s window offend pious people and cause sad feelings of longing for such adorned breads among the poor. In addition to shape or ornamentation, each baker placed his own identifying mark—perhaps a circle with a cross or what now looks like an asterisk—on the bottom of each bread. Housewives,
who preferred to prepare their bread dough at home, both in the Netherlands and New
Netherlands, gave their breads a mark as well before they sent it out to be baked. For this
service the baker received an amount set by the local authorities in both locales. While
there is no evidence that bread marks were registered in New Netherlands, we know that
they were in Holland. The Municipal Archives in Leiden still have a list of bread marks
from the late eighteenth century.27

After the bread had been weighed, shaped, risen, and finally baked, a baker
would blow on an animal horn—a common means of communication—to let his
clientele know it was ready for sale. The Fort Orange Court Minutes provide evidence
that the practice of bakers blowing their horn was brought to the New World. Jochem
Becker Backer, for example, was summoned to an extraordinary session of the court called
on April 12, 1653, because “in violation of the ordinance he had in the absence of the
commissary publicly blown the horn to sell white bread.”28

It was not the bakers who set the price for their bread but the local government.
Part of a government’s task was to ensure sufficient food to protect its people against
famine. Consequently, the municipal governments in the seventeenth century regulated the
size, weight, and price of the different kinds of bread. Bread prices were established in
relation to grain prices. Rye bread loaves had a stable weight of six and twelve pounds, but
their price would vary; this was called zetting, or fixing of the price. For example, in
Leiden between 1596 and 1620, the price for a twelve-pound loaf fluctuated between 5
and 9.4 stuivers.29 For white bread the price would be stable, but the weight would vary; this
is called called rijding, a term hard to translate but indicates that the price moves or varies.
Price and weights were announced in bulletins affixed to prominent structures in town,
such as church doors. The same was true in New Netherland, where, for example, an
ordinance of October 6, 1659, reads: each coarse loaf of eight pounds shall cost “18
stivers, counting eight white and four black wampum beads to one stiver…”30

In order to ensure that the bread was of the right size, weight, and quality, the
Dutch government appointed brood-wegers, or bread-weighers, and inspectors. The same
custom was practiced in New Amsterdam. On October 13, 1661, two men were elected
and confirmed as “overseers of the bread” and charged with the responsibility of ensuring
that “the bread is made of good material, proper weight and well baked.” Immediately after
their appointment, they were put to work and asked to give their opinion on a loaf seized
by the schout (equivalent to a sheriff), “which is not as it ought to be.” They concluded
that the bread “was made of honest material” but badly baked, possibly by someone who
was in a hurry. The baker, brought to the council, explained that he was out and had put
“his boys” to work. He was excused, but in a later discussion he was admonished for
blaming his apprentices, something that “would not be done in Holland.”31 Through time,
both in the Netherlands and New Netherland, bakers were fined for selling bread with
short weight or for adulterating bread with extra bran or other materials, even sawdust.
Their practices served to keep the overseers on the alert to spot infringements of
government rules. Simon Middleton, of the University of East Anglia, points out that the
customers themselves were quite alert, as well. “The cases of customers suing when loaves
were a fraction under weight, sold wet, or with impurities suggests that the buyers of bread
were no less precise in their calculations than the sellers.”32

In the Netherlands the bakers were organized in guilds, which not only petitioned
the government on behalf of their members but had as their main purpose the regulation
and curtailment of the bakers’ trade. These restrictions were necessary to ensure an adequate market share for each bakery. To be a full member of the baker’s guild, one had to be a citizen of the town, to have completed a certain amount of training in a bakery, and to have passed the baker’s exam. Apprentices paid an entry fee to register with the guild and worked for several years in a bakery. Once this training time was completed, they were given a certificate of competence and could start work as journeymen. After completion of the master-baker exam, they could start their own bakery. One of the five requirements of the bakkersproof, or guild’s bakers exam, of 1652 in Amsterdam was preparing and placing twenty schooten, literally “shots,” of common bread (in other words, the amount of bread (of varying weight) that could be placed [shot] into the oven at one time with a wooden peel, a method not unlike the way pizza is placed in a modern-day wood-burning pizza oven). 33 From personal experience, I can add that it takes a certain amount of skill and precision to place loaves of bread in an oven with a peel in precisely the right way—some close together, others separate with the right amount of room between each dough piece to allow for air circulation. These exams varied from city to city, as the kinds of bread varied from place to place.

The guilds were close-knit societies. Members were obliged to attend their colleagues’ funerals. Some guilds owned a special bier to carry the guild brother to his grave and in addition provided a silver shield to decorate the coffin on its last journey. In an exhibit in the early 1990s, the Westfries Museum in Hoorn showed the funeral shield of the Hoorn bakers’ guild. It portrays a baker at his work, forming his dough into balls of equal size, standing at his worktable displaying a scale and the necessary weights. Another obligation for the members was the attendance at a yearly guild meal. Such meals were accompanied by tobacco and pipes, music, food, and ample drink, as remaining bills show. One of these documents also indicates that such feasts were rowdy affairs, as it includes payment for broken glasses and trampled beer pitchers. 34

I have found no documentary evidence of a bakers’ guild in New Netherland, except for a petition of the bakers to be able to form a guild that was turned down by the Court of Fort Orange on May 9, 1655. 35 However, at various times the New Netherland bakers did band together when petitioning their governments. For example, bakers in Beverwijk requested that it should be left up to them whether or not to use sweetmeats in their baking for the Indians. Numerous other instances exist of requests for mitigation of government rulings. 36

Bread had such an important place in everyday life that it became part of the language. In order to eat, you do what you have to do: “for the lack of bread, you eat the crust of raised pies.” Or when times are hard, “you hang the bread basket high.” When times improve, “there is bread on the [cutting] board.” A spoiled child might be called “a white-bread child.” White bread is referred to as heren-brood, or “gentlemen’s bread,” while the first weeks of marriage, presumed to be the best times, are called “the white-bread weeks.” Finally, the man who bakes the staff of life assures you that “it is better to spend [your money] at the baker’s than at the pharmacist.” 37

Bread was a symbol of seventeenth-century social services, as evidenced in the painstaking care for the provisions of the orphans and other poor in both the Netherlands and New Netherland. The supply and trade of its ingredients have great economic and historical consequences, such as the success of the Amsterdam grain market or the seizure of Curaçao and Bonaire for their salt supplies. Government regulations for bread provide
insight into social customs and circumstances. Period art gives visual documentation and adds to the knowledge of this richly diverse part of Dutch culinary history. But when we bite into a freshly baked piece of crusty bread, savor its chewy texture, and are enveloped in its fragrant smell, we forget the connection between this nourishing food and a set of complex issues with far-reaching impact.

Notes


10. Folkerts, 10–12.


12. The 1655 Vischer map, reissued by Schenk, Junior, imprinted ca. 1690, # 12280, Manuscripts and Special Collections, New York State Library.
18. Rose, 55.
20. Van Maanen, 127.
24. This information was obtained through the Department of Archeology of the City of Deventer.
27. Gemeentearchief Leiden, Archief, 2536-2539, 1596–1845. I gratefully acknowledge the help of Dr. J. A. Jacobs in obtaining this information from the Municipal Archives.
28. FOCM, 49.
35. FOCM, 190.
36. Ibid., 276.