As the coronavirus upends their lives, the French flock back to bakeries for comfort

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Even without a lockdown, the lines for bakeries extend down the block in Paris, France. Now, one person after another stands 6 feet apart, and sometimes more. They line up to buy the bread they always buy, whether it’s sourdough or baguettes, even as the coronavirus spreads.

Bread, made of flour and water, is the definition of essential food. It has an image of spiritual nourishment. It has a unique role in France, where governments have toppled because of it and where this highly regulated product has long been a national symbol.

A Time Of Crisis

In a time of crisis the likes of which France and Europe have not seen for years, consumers here are turning back to bread. It’s a food the French depend on less these days than they once did but it serves as a source of comfort in the midst of uncertainty.
Coronavirus is a new, flu-like illness that began in China and has been spreading across the globe since December 2019. There is no treatment yet, so health officials have been encouraging social distancing. This means staying home and staying away from other people to help slow the spread of the virus. Most stores are closed, except for businesses that are considered essential.

"You have this return to basics," said Apollonia Poîlane, who runs Poîlane, the famed bakery that her family has operated since 1932. Bakeries are classified as essential commerce, so they are allowed to be open seven days a week.

**Sourdough Is Simple And Longer-Lasting**

These days, Poîlane offers different breads that are popular with regular customers and tourists. However, after the virus started spreading, Poîlane said, its sourdough wheat loaf became a bestseller. It is simple and longer-lasting than other varieties of bread.

"That, to me, is a sign that when everything else goes missing, we come back to something that has fed us for generations," she said.

This is as true in the French provinces as it is in Paris.

Alexandre Viron runs a grain mill in the southern French city of Toulouse. He said that sales of baguettes, the famous French loaf, have declined in recent years in favor of other varieties. Yet he said the coronavirus crisis has caused bakeries to adapt to changing demands.

In general, bakers have reduced the number of pastries they make, he said. "There's a push toward bread. They're increasing the number of large loaves that are sold entirely or by the piece, which allows customers to have a bigger daily intake than a baguette. This is bread that lasts longer."

Steven Kaplan is a historian of France who specializes in the history of bread at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Kaplan thinks it is important to note that bread occupies a less important place in the modern French diet than it did in earlier eras.

In 1875, he said, the average daily diet in France included 800 grams (28 ounces) of bread. That figure dropped to 630 grams (22 ounces) in 1900 and to 400 grams (14 ounces) in 1950. Today, the average daily amount is approximately 82 grams (3 ounces).

**Bread Is Symbolic**

In a crisis such as this, it's not the calories represented by bread that matter, but the symbolism, Kaplan said. It's a "kind of promise that we'll get through it."

"The power of bread is particularly emotional now. It's no longer caloric, a vital necessity," Kaplan said. "Bread still is the conveyor of this extraordinary, important feeling we have that the state cares about us. It's a reaffirmation of solidarity. Solidarity is really represented by sharing bread." The price of bread was controlled by the French government until 1986.
In French, the word for bread is "pain." A common French word for friend, "copain," means "person with whom you break bread." Similarly, one expression for wealth is "avoir du blé," which means to have flour.

The cultural value of bread is clear. A quintessential French photograph is "Le Petit Parisien," which means "The Small Parisian." Taken by French photographer Willy Ronis in 1953, the photo captures a little boy gleefully running through the streets of Paris with a baguette as tall as he is.

Another classically French photograph is Elliott Erwitt's "Provence, 1955." His photograph shows a boy on his father's motorcycle, gazing back at the camera as they head off on a poplar-lined country road, berets, baguettes and all.

The baguettes are the only aspect of that world that remains, since few people besides tourists wear berets these days.

So it was really no surprise that when France's lockdown was announced in mid-March, many rushed to the bakeries. They wanted to stock up on the one product they felt they could not live without, a feeling deeply rooted in French history, in which fears of starvation were common.

For the French, the impulse to rush to the bakeries is much more instinctive than it is for Americans, Kaplan said. "There's no French person who doesn't have the memory of Grandma or Grandpa talking about how we had nothing to eat except horrible rutabagas in 1943."

He said that there will be a return to the basics and fundamentals.