

20SHORTGRASS.DOC

The warm winter over-stimulated the sourdough jug in the kitchen. First flight of gnats broke formation in a few circles and crashed into the liquid, indicating five percent alcohol content.

All that needs to be done to correct gnats floating in sourdough is to add caraway seed the first baking after the infestation. Different than the bitter flavor of dissolving red wheat weevils in the flour bin, the decomposition of caraway-flavored gnats increases the rich, malt flavor of sourdough breads.

Gnats, like yeast spores, become residents of a kitchen. The swarm here at the ranch goes back to Mother's times. Early in the morning, they fly from a roost upon the aprons hanging on the pantry door to buzz the breakfast table and tune the day.

Unlike wild varieties, the domestic kitchen species is not attracted to human nostrils or earlobes. Invaders are easy to detect. Eyes, ears or noses obsess the untamed kinds.

The dictionary says, "Gnats belong to the *Diptera* family and the *Epidide* order" – useful information to have on hand to skim the sourdough. Yet we cooks have inspired moments.

Be no surprise to overhear one of us skim the crock singing:

"High Dip-tera to a gnat's era, High Epi-di-dee to fold a gnat's knee.

And ho diddle, diddle to a high Diptera for the familiee to the order of Epi-di-deee."

After the concoction warms from spring weather, the sourdough needs to be tempered by adding buttermilk. Spring is also the time to place a saucer of straight sourdough on the drain board to boost the gnats through molting.

But again, refer to the way the dictionary brushes gnats off as "two-winged mosquitoes." No wonder the subject is so tedious. Gosh-a-mighty, a six year-old kid knows the difference between a gnat and a mosquito without a disciple of Noah Webster going off on a tangent.

Before the confounded dictionary interrupted the flow, undiluted, straight sourdough (mash) was going to be put in a saucer on the drain board to resurrect and fortify the house gnats through molting. I apologize for wandering off.

Appears, however, to be a good time to drop the gnats and discuss a change in the recipe to make sourdough biscuits. The way it worked, now and then making whole wheat loaf bread, I'd pitch in a bit of dough, or a bit of the leavings off the pastry cloth into the sourdough jug.

Later, mixing a double recipe of biscuits last summer, the idea struck after using one cup of buttermilk to one cup of sourdough: why not use one cup of white flour and add one cup of whole wheat to the same amounts of the baking powder, shortening and sugar instead of using straight white flour?

The answer: on the first try, the watery sourdough liquefied the dough too much; plus, the difference in the solubility of the whole wheat changed the texture. Specifically, the mixture made a cream of wheat-like mush, pasted on the rolling pin and the pastry cloth into a conglomeration that'd rank an Aunt Jemima pancake with the crepe section of a Parisian cooking class. The biscuit cutter dripped from the bowl to the pan to land in the shape of a splotch of peaked dough settling into a brown meringue on the bread pan.

After two tries to correct the sourdough, the recipe works using a tad more flour on the pastry cloth to knead the dough. So as the recipe stands, take your regular biscuit recipe, start out adding a third whole wheat flour to see how you like the different flavor and texture of whole wheat. (One precaution: if grocery store bread suits your taste, your old buds are so shot that whole wheat

flour mixtures can't save you, nor can any help from my kitchen rescue you from slow starvation.)

Please don't be misled into thinking that being able to tolerate gnats and mess around experimenting with flours means a carefree life. Cleaning my desk the other day, of all places to find a spook, and old news clipping surfaced dated 1927 in Brownwood, Texas, of a Doctor Jewel Daugherty removing a fever thermometer from a preacher's son's abdomen. "Fifty days before," so the story read, "the father was taking the son's temperature and somehow he swallowed the thermometer."

Without reading more, I rushed into the kitchen to count the cooking thermometers. I'd been baking whole wheat loaves to soothe a couple of friends in big trouble, trouble too big to notice whether they swallowed a handful of horseshoe nails, much less a thick, mercury-filled thermometer.

The instruments checked. I stood real quiet for a long time. The article said the thermometer from the kid's stomach came out reading 106 degrees, normal for a boy's stomach. Bad that it's too late to learn more. Been a good question to ask what else was in the kid's stomach. A father's sermons prompt deep distractions.