

BREAD AS SYMBOL OF LIFE
(ESSENTIAL GUID OF HISTORICAL ARMENIAN BREAD)



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The average person often uses bread in a meal without even thinking what Bread truly is or what it represents culturally; to them bread is simply bread. But bread has a special place in Armenian culture — it contains wisdom of the past.

That is why the goal of mankind presently should be to try and understand the whole essence of what our ancestors wished to pass on to their descendants through this valuable food product.

Armenian ritual culture allows us to understand the symbolic nature of bread before Christ, and demonstrate Christian impulses through bread.

Defining the role of bread in traditional culture of the world, we realize that bread is not only a food product but also a tool, a communication system to connect different social groups. Bread reveals the connection between humanity and nature, life, and other planes.

There are many mysteries as to what is served as bread. First, bread is made of grains, or cereals, grown with ancient methods. To understand cereal cultivation from soil preparation to harvesting, milling, making flour, mixing with water, and preparation via heat, we must go back to our past, to our great-grandfathers, to myths, legends, fairy tales and songs.

Mythology is a phase preceding religious awareness. Religious awareness — in the base sense of the word — is a unity of a person with divinity and their inner world.

In myths and fairy tales of cultures across the globe (i.e. Armenian myths about Enoch, Hivlik; *The Bluebird* by Belgian author and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck), cereals are “servants” of speech between the Sun and the Earth; they are introduced as gifts from the Heavenly Father and the Earth Mother.

Sowing was often seen as a religious act, a harvest as ceremony. Melodies of ploughmen’s songs raised their souls up to celestial depths, inspiring and encouraging them while their bodies were busy with heavy physical work, watering the soil with the sweat of their labor. Cereals represent a concentrated ray of light pollinated not by insects but by air — the astral carrier. They are the only plant family that has over 4000 varieties, and none of them poisonous.

Wheat, although it originated in the East, is spread throughout the world on nearly every continent, as a blessing of the Sun, and continues to stand as a symbol in countless cultures and religions. Wheat seed has symbolized fertility for millennia. Cooked wheat berries often symbolize unity. Many cultures traditionally scatter wheat seeds beside a newborn child to save the child from near evils. Ears of rye were hung on the walls of nurseries or burned in a fire to protect children from fear or nightmares. And through all of this, when milled, mixed with water, and cooked on fire, wheat became bread.

Bread is the vessel upon which cereals and grains enter the human body and spirit. The process of making bread can be seen as a metaphor for the making of a truly moral and strong person. The steps symbolically mirror what humans must also go through to attain inner well-being. To make bread, one must: 1) mill solid grains to create flour; 2) mix

flour with water to make dough; 3) knead the dough to achieve the proper consistency and work air into it, 4) thermal maturation in the oven, etc. All these processes translate into human maturity: the physical (flour) is somatically presented in the solid, impregnated with the liquid (dough), with its ethereal body, inner organization, which absorbs astral body (plasticization through air) and lives with its ego inside through thermal organization (baking).

Bread is the most human form of nutritive means. In the way of its preparation lies, in the phytogenic form, the mystery of human creation. In biblical mythology, for Christ to say of bread “It is a body of mine” is not only about bread as a symbol of physical development, but starting particularly from this era onwards, also as a symbol of spiritual life. Accordingly, after Christ came to Earth, there was no longer a need for humans to search for spiritual food as a means of escaping the sensual world into the spiritual one.

His corporeal form, which was absent to all once He obtained religious life, i.e. leaving the sensual world in order to enter the spiritual realm of existence — that form of this spiritual world once was present on the Earth historically. And this historically physical presence of Christ is symbolized by bread. Within bread heavenly forces, the divine power carried from heavenly distances, are felt. Christ has solved this spiritual problem for all people on Earth by associating himself with earthen bread: “It is a body of mine, which for you is transferred, so create it in commemoration of me”. Inasmuch that bread already symbolizes a spiritual person, i.e. the transformed physical body which is transferred for all. Hence Christ symbolizes the grand phenomenon; a phenomenon of the farmer who, cultivating soil, “works” on the body of the Christ, like a person by means of the own "Ego" organizations (the center of the soul) works on his physical body, changing himself into a Spiritual Being.

While cultivating the soil, a person emits these forces which transform the ground, and from the ground penetrate him. These forces are the major impulses of Earth’s development — they are forces of the Savior, representing the blood of Golgotha, flowing down on the ground, penetrating his spirit. The beginning of Christ has incorporated with the earth, and the ground becomes a body of the principle of Christ. His words “Who eats my bread, he tramples on me with his feet” should be interpreted directly. When a man eats bread, he eats the body of Earth, the body of the Earth Spirit, which since the event on Golgotha has become one with the spirit of Christ. When consuming bread, a person receives communion with Christ, as the direct meaning of his word. It is necessary to comprehend that and to treat with deep respect and awe the wisdom of that which we eat — to understand the essence of a meal, this divine force, this universal ceremony which comprises much more, than all books of worldly life, collected together in one earthen volume.

Bread is also a symbol of individuality, as dictated by the concept of receiving this communion. And we know that the more spiritually individual a person is, the better carrier of love he is. And there, where blood is held down, people love because they are brought to something they should love. But when a person is granted with individuality, if he cares and cultivates divine force within himself, then the impulse of love will go from the heart of one person to the heart of another.

The ancient symbolism of bread is also expressed through different means. Magic and love legends, various faiths and popular beliefs, as well as ceremonies and rituals are innately connected with breads. For instance, in Bulgaria, they would bake a small round loaf of bread, put it down into the water, then take out and give to a sick person as protection against fear. Another popular belief followed that bread has a soul and should not be cut with a knife, lest the soul be taken from the bread. Sometimes bread was associated with the separation of the soul from the corporeal body: keeping a loaf of bread over a dead person symbolized the transfer of the human soul into the loaf. Also of note is an old traditional ceremony of putting bread on the belly of a pregnant woman, as something holy to manifest for both the right of a baby for access to food and the right for material realization of his soul.

Bread as a ceremonial tool also stood as a tool of communication, as it served to realize contacts between a person and society, a person and family, an individual and social groups, a human and nature. Namely the communicativeness of bread — its propensity to symbolically bridge anthropological systems — defined the place of bread in ceremonial culture of nations. Bread acquaints people, traditionally strengthening relationships (remember the Armenian sayings, *Agh u hatsov dimaworel*, “to meet with bread and salt”; or *Mi ktor agh u hats utel*, “to eat a piece of bread and salt”) both in personal contacts during holidays, high ceremonies, and in sacrificial ceremonies to become closer to the spiritual world. The meaning of ceremonial bread can be understood as essential in every variant of ceremony itself. The sharing of bread, having a meal — this is a communicative processes, uniting a person and the society at large, transferring the contents from all to one. The ceremonial nature of bread is also expressed in the process of baking, which is connected with various beliefs and spells. For instance, they say that if a wife samples alum, then it will take her away and she will take all the wealth with her from the house. Or the fact that in many nations the process of New Year bread preparation takes twelve days and nights (from Christmas till the New Year). Or the very phenomena that bread is baked: 1) in honor of labor ceremonies, such as the first sowing, the end of harvest; 2) in honor of celebrations, such as baptizing, St. John Baptist's Day, Vardavar, Trndez, etc.

Additionally, ceremonial bread preparation prove interesting. For instance, it was said that ceremonial bread for weddings in Armenia had to be baked by “a clean wife – never parturient and non-pregnant”; in Bulgaria, it had to be baked by a non-menstruating virgin. Of equal importance is who is adjacent to the baking process, either assisting or participating. The baking profession was considered very special because of this — not only because of his professional skills in alum preparation and bread baking, but also for the supposed purity of his moral character. The ceremonial nature of bread also involves specific place and time, actions, verbal formulas, songs, ceremonial participants, to whom bread is dedicated, etc. The name of bread is generally chosen depending on the person or event to which it is dedicated. For instance, for New Year, *Tari Hats*, or *Midjink*; baked for Easter, *Krkkeni* – named after the baking method over fire.

Symbology is a very important component of ceremonial bread. Bread as a key element of a ceremony can bring to fruition rich and fertile symbols and statements. Ceremonial bread's inherent state of symbolism confers to it a uniquely aesthetic quality. This aesthetic-symbolic function of a ritual item makes possible the force of its self-estimation

within the ritual space. The attitude to items is formed (and informed) by the ritual situation; as such, the item can always germinate comprehension within ritual participants. Symbolism brings necessary visual representation to larger ideas which induce emotional contact both between and within social groups. And simply enough, both the shape of a loaf and the images inscribed upon it are considered to be symbols of what bread means to the culture or society writ large.

Armenian ceremonial breads, as a part of the grander development of bread's place within the historical context of the ancient world and meals in general, are of special interest among the ritual breads of many peoples. Greek, Roman, and Assyrian historians (i.e. Xenophon, Aristotle, Alexander) often displayed an anthropological interest in breads of greater contemporary Armenia. This study was not limited to the process of preparation, which takes into account the astrology, methods of creating alum, baking technologies, incantations, etc., but also included the kinds and shapes of bread in connection to their dedication in honor of holidays and ceremonies — how they connected to these ritualistic observations.

Generally speaking, only experienced women with professional skills were involved in dough preparation. Once the required quantity of bread was identified, which determines the number of people collectively using the fireplace. The necessary quantity of ingredients and tools was calculated to bake this required quantity of bread; only after that may the bread maker's assistants be found.

Great attention was paid to alum preparation at the beginning of the baking process. The alum had to mature for no less than three days, after which dough preparation could start. Alum would be added to the dough and kneaded thoroughly. This mixture would then be covered with wool fabric and left overnight to rise. The following morning, the dough would be ready to bake. Moreover, for different kinds of bread, many different baking forms and methods were used — even different kinds of wood for the oven — or *tondir* — were preferred depending on the recipe and purpose of the bread.

Now let us review the most common Armenian ceremonial bread varieties, namely Lavash, Matnakash, Somi, Bokon, Tari Ats, etc.

Lavash

Lavash is a very thin — approximately 2-3 mm thick — bread variety. It is very widely used within Armenian cuisine. The main peculiarity of this bread is that it can be stored for extended periods of time without any consideration of special storage conditions. Its long shelf-life led it to be traditionally baked once a month, in quantities that would last around four weeks for however many people were within the family or group.

Alum-free dough is used to make lavash. The prepared dough was rolled out with *grtnaks* (wooden rolling pins with handles), after which the rolled dough was stretched by hand in the air, with motions recalling the soaring flight of an eagle.

Then the dough was stretched on special pillows, covered with a cotton fabric, and placed on preliminary heated walls of the *tondir*.

A traditional *tondir* (or *tandoor*) is a round hole in the ground lined with fireproof clay or basalt tiles, constructed similarly to a well. It also has an underground tunnel attached, which is connected to another hole with a wooden pipe called *atski* which aides in the flow of air to the fire. The *tondir* is of fairly simple construction, meaning it can be made almost anywhere without much need for extra materials or special tools. Therefore, Armenians have them everywhere: in plains, high in the mountains, etc.

A very important factor with lavash is the wood variety burned in the *tondir*. For lavash, grape vine is nearly uniformly used. Grape vine makes excellent kindling, burns very slowly, and doesn't have any associated strong aroma that can add an unexpected flavor to the bread. In mountainous areas, beech tree wood is more widely used. It burns slower than grape vine, but lavash made on that fire is tastier.

After a fire is started in the *tondir*, the hole is closed in order to create coals (charcoal) — an environment without oxygen is favorable for creating coals. When the hole is opened for a moment, the oxygen penetrates into the *tondir*, speeding up the burning process and preventing smoke which would add an undesirable smokiness to the bread.

The coal transfers its heat to the clay or basalt walls of the *tondir*. The prepared dough is then fixed on the red-hot walls with a sharp movement of the hand. The lavash is ready in seconds because the dough is extremely thin. After it is baked, it is placed outside to cool, then piled up, wrapped in fabric, and stored.

In ceremonial Armenian culture, lavash has found a wide habitat. One cannot imagine weddings or any other celebrations without the presence of lavash. Lavash, as a symbol of love, was put over the shoulders of newly-wedded couples.

Matnakash

This bread variety is made with rising dough and has an oval shape with parallel lines on the surface. Matnakash is baked in ovens, which Armenians call *poors* (the word originated from word *oor*, which means “fire” or “heat stream”, similar to “dry steam”). Even now, matnakash is considered one of the most widely used bread varieties, along with lavash bread. It is typically made once a week, as it cannot be stored for long periods of time. Matnakash is thick, and small quantities are eaten as a snack as the main course of dinner is being prepared. Matnakash, cheese, and onions were generally served first for this purpose.

Bokon

Bokon is also made from rising dough and is baked in an oven much the same way as matnakash. The only difference is the round and seemingly swollen shape. The word *bokon* means swollen in Armenian. The dough preparation takes more time than matnakash as well, and bokon has its own unique place in Armenian ritual culture. Matnakash was mostly used in everyday food, whereas bokon was often decorated with

dried fruits and nuts to exemplify fertility, success, and achievements, and was mainly baked for special events and holy days.

Asil-Basil

Asil-Basil is a toast made from yeast dough in the shape of people, symbolizing dead and resurrected deities and divinities such as Nara, Akltiza, and Ara the Beautiful. It was baked in ovens and only for special holidays.

Sama or Somy

This is triangular shaped bread made in north Nakhichevan from yeast dough and has a thick crust that gives a unique taste to this bread variety. Not every baker has enough skills to bake bread with such a special crust (this speaks to why bread made by such a qualified baker was valued so highly). The triangular shape of the bread symbolizes the micro and macro cosmic beginnings of life. This bread wasn't specifically attached to any event or holy day, but rather was made to honor guests or the beloved within a group (father, mother, son, etc.).

Also of note with this bread variety is that it's typically used during funeral ceremonies (*kelekhi hats*) to honor the deceased. This pays attention to the spiritual side, symbolizing the spirit leaving the body and receiving communion with the divine world.

Krkeny

This primitive yet unique bread is made from yeast-free dough directly on heated coals. In Armenian, *krkeny* means "from fire", i.e. baked on the fire. It is made mainly by shepherds or highlanders and is appreciated for the speed and ease of baking. The ash that remains on the bread (as result of contact with the coals) makes it special. One of the important factors in *krkeny* is the selection of wood for the coals.

In the Borchalu region, *krkeny* bread was closely connected with the name of Hambo. There are many legends about Hambo, who was a fugitive both before and during the rule of the Communists. A guerilla of sorts, he spent his all life in the mountains and passed away there. People often said that someone who ate Hambo's *krkeny* bread became his brother by blood, and undefeatable like Hambo himself.

Here it might be mentioned that this particular bread has an identification role as well, i.e. assimilating or uniting one person with another through the "breaking of bread".

Astgh hats

This means "star bread", because it often takes the shape of a star. This bread is made in the *tondir* on Barikendan Day, which signifies personal freedom and falls before Easter.

Chik and Eg

There are two different shapes of this same bread, which symbolize the dichotomy of female and male beings. This kind of bread was mainly used by Georgian Armenians of the Borchalu region, around the ancient city (and present day capital of Georgia) Tbilisi.

Eg (female), has to be kept in flour before baking to give time to be shaped. Chik (male) is baked immediately. This bread is a ceremonial element of the *Surb Sarkis* holiday, which celebrates happiness of youth and the demonstration of love.

According to lore, after a girl eats this bread and goes to sleep, she will dream. When she feels thirsty within her dream, whoever ends up giving her water will become her “knight”, or love interest. A similar bread with similar lore attached is more prevalent now, called *aghablit*. Chik and Eg has been long forgotten by the public conscious.

Aghablit

This is the more modern equivalent of bread symbolizing those in love. It is very salty (*agh* means “salt”, *blit* is “bread”). In the past, it was baked in honor of the goddess Astghik, a goddess of fertility and love in Armenian mythology. Young couples in love ate this bread before going to sleep and could supposedly see their beloved in their dreams.

In this case, we encounter not only a symbolic element of bread, but also two other symbols that sustain life: salt, and water, which respectively symbolize wealth and eternity.

Tari Hats

Lastly, the most ceremonial Armenian bread is called Tari Hats, which has an extremely special place in the ceremonial life of our culture. This bread is a key to pages of the history, knowledge, and philosophy of our culture.

The bread’s name derives from its annual purpose: it was prepared in honor of the New Year. *Tari* means “year”, and *Hats* is “bread”.

This bread is the bread of the new year, baked from rising yeast dough to a size that corresponded with the number of members of the family.

Tari hats is round with the top decorated with myriad different symbols and an edge similar to a belt or fringed selvedge. Different plant seeds and dried fruits are often used for decoration, which symbolize a fertile crop of the forthcoming year. There is a tradition of placing a seed from an apricot or similar fruit inside the dough, and the person who receives the slice with the seed in it was considered to be the lucky person of the year.

While examining the symbolic nature of this mysterious bread, one will inevitably go down a rabbit hole of mythology and philosophy, in wisdom of the past stored for centuries in this unique source of history of one of the ancient nations of the world.

The circular pattern on the edges symbolizes the Belt of the God — that which our ancestors, ancient philosophers, and interpreters of the Bible call a rainbow. The rainbow, according to the Bible, symbolizes the first day of creation, or, in other more simple terms, the beginning of time itself. According to biblical sources, the Archangel Raphael's words were as follows: "The rainbow is a mantle of God".

Thusly, the rainbow has often symbolized the metamorphosis of a person into a being who is one with God. It is a symbol referencing the harmony of seven colors, which tells of the seven proportions of a person and his growth in accordance with the seven planet conditions of the Earth. A rainbow can represent the seven days of creation, or the seven hypostases of the Apocalypse, the seven seals of one's imaginative perception of the world, seven horns (disclosures of a spiritual world), or even seven bowls of anger — representing what should be rejected by a person in order to achieve cognition of the supreme world, i.e. cognition of a spiritual world beyond this.

There are twelve round balls, either of dough or of different dried fruits, placed in regular intervals on the belt of the bread. They symbolize the twelve Apostles of Christ, the twelve months of in year, the twelve signs of the zodiac, as well as the twelve sacred nights of Christmas, from December 25 (*Amanor*) to the Feast of the Epiphany or New Year, January 6 (*Nor Tari*).

The cross depicted on the face of the bread divides it into four parts, which symbolically represent the four historically known continents of the planet, the four hemispheres, and the four conditions of the planets: the Saturn, the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth itself. Most importantly, these four sections are directly connected to the four groups of souls of mankind: Leo, Taurus, a human being, and an Eagle. Also they symbolize the evangelist Apostles of Christ the Savior: Mark, Luke, John, and Matthew. The cross on the bread, like the cross of Jesus, bears in itself the symbol of death and resurrection, the symbol of reincarnation.

The Sun, as a great symbol of light and good, a symbol of fertility and joy, is depicted on one of four shares of Tari Hats. The opposite quarter is decorated with a symbol of the half moon — to be exact, a waxing moon, which represents a transformation of good and simultaneously is a symbol of the reflected sun.

The third quarter depicts a constellation of seven stars, i.e. Ursa Major, or the "Great Bear", as a symbol of apogee, a symbol of harmonization of the poles.

The fourth quarter represents another set of stars, symbolizing outer space and the celestial sky.

However, there is one more interesting detail on this bread. In the quarter of the sun, there is an image of one more symbol — the star *Lusastgh* or *Othi astgh*, or Venus.

And on the opposite part where the Half Moon is represented, there is another star which is parallel to Venus, whose name has been subject to discussion for many years, up to this very day (according to V. Bdoyan). In my opinion it is a representation of the planet Mars.

Let's assume, according to medieval sources of occult schools, that the evolution of the Earth has two halves of development: Mercury and Mars. Frequently, to keep occult secrets, mystics of Middle Ages resorted to myriad nuances and clues: in particular, they named Mercury as Venus, and Venus as Mercury. This is noted even within the New Testament, where by the word of Christ: "I have given your ego a direction upwards to a morning star, to Mercury". But it is well-known that Venus is in fact the morning star. It is also ample proof of that these two planets were frequently interchanged verbally.

And at last, dear friends, THINK: before stretching a hand to break off a piece of bread: "So many lives are there in far (in the past), and so many lives will be (in the future)!"

REMEMBER... BREAD is a solemn performance; BREAD is a symbol of life.

BREAD MAKING General direction:

White bread

To made yeast please take 10 gram Common Hops, 5 gram milled seeds of Cornelia Cherry and 5 gram of flowers of yellow sweet clover, mix it, then add 200 ml hot water and brew for 10 minutes. Strain the infusion and add it to the 5 cups of white wheat flour. Add on the top 5 gram salt, 15 gram fresh milk then use the hands to mix it, to become dough. If will needed, place extra flour or water to have a balance consistent of dough (not to dry and not to soft). Knead for 5 minutes and put the dough into the large bowl and covered with towel to stay about 1 hour for raised. Then punch down and knead again for 5 minutes and place in the pan with spread flour or brushed olive oil. Then bake in oven for 10-15 minutes with 200-210°C and lower heat to continue baking 160-170°C temperature for other 25-30 minutes. Cooking time is much depended, that's why test the dough and try to feel the smell of bread.

Whole Wheat or Barley bread

The technology is the same as the white bread only instead of 5 cups of flour need to be used 3 cup for whole wheat bread and 2 cup barley flour.

Corn bread

The dough of the corn bread is a little bit different from white, whole wheat and barley bread. Again the main technology is the same, but we will use 3 cups of corn flour for 300 ml of yeast. Also different the punching time: it s 15 minutes instead of 5 minutes for white bread; and baking temperature- 180°C and time about 15 minutes.

It is very important to cool Corn bread about 1 hour before using.

TOPPINGS and GLAZES

As a topping for bread usually before baking dough sprinkled with flour, grained wheat, crashed salt, cracked barley, poppy or sesame seeds. Some regional breads topped by sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, roasted walnuts, etc.

As a glazes usually using egg yolk or egg protein with water or milk. If you want to have bread with **deep crust** color, please use the mix of one egg protein with 10 gram of milk; for **rich dark** color – mixture of one egg yolk with 10 gram olive oil and 2 gram salt and for **crisp crust** – one whole egg and 15 gram water.

HERBS and HERBAL BREAD

Armenian likes the herb that's why more then 40 varieties of herbs were used for bread topping and baking. Some of those useful herbs are shown in presented table.

No.	English Name	Latin Name	Armenian Name by English letters
1.	Anis	<i>Pimpinella anisum</i>	Anison
2.	Asafetida	<i>Ferula assafoetida</i>	Nardes
3.	Aster	<i>Aster alpinus</i>	Astgik lernayin
4.	Blood root	<i>Sanguinaria</i>	Arnazokh
5.	Celery	<i>Apium graveolens</i>	Kyaraviz
6.	Chaste tree	<i>Vitex agnus castus</i>	Hagni
7.	Chickweed	<i>Stellaria media</i>	Khorizakhot
8.	Cornelia flowers	<i>Cornus mas</i>	Honatsagik
9.	Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia rostkoviana</i>	Archatsagik
10.	Fenugreek	<i>Trigonella</i>	Hachamemk
11.	Herb Bennet	<i>Geum orientale</i>	Mareamatsagik
12.	Jack-by-the-Hedge	<i>Alliaria officinalis</i>	Skhorik
13.	Lady's mantle	<i>Alchemilla</i>	Chtablit
14.	Licorice	<i>Glycyrrhiza glabra</i>	Matutak
15.	Mastic tree oil	<i>Oilum Pistacia Terebinthus</i>	Vanaydzet
16.	Mellow	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i>	Detum
17.	Mugwort	<i>Arthemisia</i>	Ngatsagik
18.	Olive oil	<i>Olea europea</i>	Dzitenu ptug
19.	Peppermint	<i>Mentha piperita</i>	Ananukh
20.	Plantain	<i>Plantago dioritica</i>	Djrakhot
21.	Poppy seeds	<i>Papaver phoeas</i>	Haronatsagik
22.	Safflower	<i>Carthamus tinctorus</i>	Gatatsagik
23.	Saffron	<i>Crocus</i>	Khrkum
24.	Sesame seeds	<i>Sesamum orientalis</i>	Knjut
25.	Sugar palm	<i>Arega saccharifera</i>	Armav
26.	Solomon seal	<i>Portulaca oleracea</i>	Sogomoni tak
27.	St.Johns Wort	<i>Hipericum perforatum</i>	Meronatsagik
28.	Silverweed	<i>Potentilla</i>	Hzoruk
29.	Velvet flower	<i>Amarantus</i>	Havakatar
30.	Water cress	<i>Lepidium latifolium</i>	Nvardak
31.	Wild plume	<i>Prunis spinosa</i>	Khareki ptug