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# IT'S ALL ABOUT ARTS



**ERIK GEHRING**

# Culinary Comfort in the Age of COVID-19

An Interview with Jackie Reizes by Gail Spilsbury

As soon as the coronavirus hit America in early March, many people naturally turned to their kitchens for comfort, rediscovering the creativity and togetherness of cooking and sharing a family meal. Home-cooking offers so much—satisfaction, enjoyment, and deeper relationship—things that today's busy world of take-out, pub-life, and social media has all but swept aside.

Of course there are many culinary artists who never gave up their love for cooking, baking, and sharing the pleasures of the table, and over the past years we've enjoyed their posts with pictures of breads, entrées, and desserts. But with the COVID-19 crisis, these enthusiasts' postings have become a great foundation—a font of culinary news and ideas for the rest of us getting back into kitchen fulfillment.

New England home-cook *par excellence*, Jackie Reizes, shares her kitchen creativity and reflections during the COVID-19 siege with Gail Spilsbury for *It's All About Arts*.

**GS: My mouth has watered for several years now viewing your Facebook posts with all the pictures of breads, desserts, and meals you make. With today's coronavirus sending us all into home-seclusion, cooking has become a big solace and source of creativity for many of us, and your tantalizing posts are now adding where to find unavailable supplies. What's the crisis been like for you, a true pro in the kitchen?**

**JR:** First, I'm by no means a pro! However, I have been what I guess you'd call food-centric from a very young age. More of which later. What has changed during this crisis is the degree to which my friends are reaching out to share their recipes, ask for suggestions, post photos and food memories on Facebook, and so forth. Also, many ingredients are just plain unavailable to me and my friends, most of whom are not going out to stores. For example, there's a flour shortage one can attribute only to hoarding. Rather than giving up on my twice-weekly bread baking, I decided to investigate more deeply. I wound up ordering twenty-five pounds of a beautiful organic heritage flour straight from a mill in Minnesota. I was able to share my find with friends, who then placed orders from the same mill. It has been necessary to be very imaginative in order to create balanced and tasty meals from what's on hand. I had a can of refried beans, some green tomatillo sauce, and some cheddar. Alas, there was nothing in which to wrap the ingredients. Fortuitously, a Facebook post featuring a sweet potato and flour roti popped up. I had never made anything like that in my life. But it was wonderful! It used just two ingredients. I only had to microwave one sweet potato, mash it with a fork, and mix it with flour. The dough was made into balls, rolled out with a rolling pin, and cooked on an ungreased cast-iron pan. My husband Bill pronounced this superior to store-bought tortillas, and I will definitely make these again. (continued)



*Sweet potato flatbread roti*

**GS:** Have you experienced any new dimensions in relationships with friends and neighbors as a result of the crisis, especially with food as the unifier?

**JR:** Oh, absolutely! There has been quite a bit of trading going on, all with proper social distancing. The parent of a former second grader mentioned on Facebook that she could not find yeast. Also, her two sons are now at home and have voracious appetites. We met between our homes, she with her pick-up truck and I in my tiny car. She gladly accepted yeast and dark chocolate brownies, and I was *thrilled* when she placed three dozen freshly laid eggs from her wonderful, happy chickens in the back of my hatchback.



*Gift of eggs in trade for yeast*

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Also, another friend and parent of a former student mentioned that since he's now working from home, it seems like the right time to try baking. He ordered the flour from Minnesota. However, there's a serious shortage of yeast, both in markets and online. I searched online and could find yeast sold only as a set of three, one-pound bags—a lifetime supply! So I ordered the yeast and divided it among several people, all of whom are now baking at home.

As a result of the crisis, I'm communicating with neighbors I didn't know at all. Two of them offered to bring us food from their grocery store visits. I've brought them breads, carrot cake, brownies, and other baked goods. I've also been able to give them disinfectant wipes, which makes shopping safer for us all.

**GS: Do you think our seclusion and renewed interest in culinary creativity will have a lasting impact on people, or as soon as the crisis is over, will everyone go back to the external "food world" with no time or interest in kitchen experimenting or relaxed, homecooked meals with family?**

**JR:** That's an interesting question. I'm not sure. Certainly many people I know have discovered that baking bread can be quite easy once one gets the hang of it. The smell of bread baking is intoxicating. Why would they ever go back, especially if they master easy things like the no-knead bread, the craze for which was ubiquitous about a decade ago? Families who have never had time for family meals are discovering how wonderfully these together-times over homemade food punctuate our everyday lives.



*No-knead bread*

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**GS: What is the power, or potential, for any of us, of “food made with love”?**

**JR:** “Food made with love” changes our lives and brings us together. When I get together with friends, I know their culinary preferences and can tailor the meals. A shared meal of Sauerbraten, red cabbage, and potato dumplings can open up conversation about a past trip to Germany like nothing else. People are always appreciative when one takes the time to put together a meal that’s 100 percent home-cooked.

**GS: When were you first aware of your innate passion for the culinary arts?**

**JR:** Ha! I have dreamed of food and loved being in the kitchen since I was very young. I was permitted to cook an entire meal for my beloved third-grade teacher, Mrs. Carter. She must have been heroic to seem so delighted by a meal of “Swedish meatballs,” the recipe for which came from *Betty Crocker’s Cookbook for Boys and Girls* and contained two varieties of Campbell’s soup! But it wasn’t all prepared meals for me during my childhood. My parents were immigrants from Nazi Austria and Germany, and they sought out not only real, European-style bread, but also terrific cheeses and specialty ingredients. My father was in the restaurant and hotel business until he discovered he had an aptitude for computer work. So I spent many hours at restaurants and in restaurant kitchens. In addition to his managerial work, my father taught stewardship on the Swedish-American ocean liners and consulted with restaurants.

We went out to eat often—food from Russia, Hawaii, Spain, and other countries. We lived in New Orleans before relocating to Lexington, Massachusetts, when I was eleven, and it was in New Orleans that I fell in love with Creole cuisine. My brother and I had many meals at the Rib Room of the Royal Orleans Hotel, where I learned to love the crackling skin of a properly cooked prime rib, which I can still taste today. In these years, I also learned to roll out and gently pull strudel dough on a linen tablecloth from my Viennese grandmother.

My father amassed an enormous collection of restaurant menus from around the world. One of my favorite pastimes as a child was “playing restaurant” and ordering from the various menus from many venerable places. Oh, I could go on...



*Viennese chocolate-hazelnut cake*

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**GS: When you travel, how does your curiosity for cuisine play a role?**

**JR:** Our holiday destinations are generally interwoven with our culinary intentions. Part of the joy of travel for me is planning where and what we'd like to eat. We've planned trips to southwest Louisiana to places where we might have a particular, gold-standard boudin, gumbo, or crawfish *étouffée*.

I've loved fried chicken since I was perhaps four years old, and I am still on the prowl for that perfect piece. When I was seven or eight and traveling across the country, I wrote an elaborate fried-chicken guide to America, filled with notations about crunchiness, juiciness, and appearance on the plate, and embellished with foil stars. There are many reasons my husband and I can't stay away from Vienna, one of which is an irresistible *Wiener Backhuhn*! While most people associate Vienna with a schnitzel, I continue to seek out the perfect Viennese fried chicken. My favorite, so far, is at a small, unassuming locals' place called [Zum Friedensrichter](#), where the free-range chicken is marinated in yogurt, dipped in breadcrumbs before frying, and served with a berry compote, lamb's lettuce (Feldsalat), and potato salad. I have tried to recreate this dish at home, and must say I think it's been a success.



*Wiener Backhuhn*

**GS: Could you share your favorite recipe—for the sheer enjoyment it gave you—during COVID-19's isolation?**

**JR:** Hmm. My favorite so far is pretty ordinary. I decided I did not want to go without a birthday cake this year, so I cut all the ingredients in half and made a lovely carrot cake. My husband and I savored one piece each. I then gave a piece to a neighbor and froze the remaining slices for an evening when we need a lift, an evening I'm sure will come. I followed the Cook's Illustrated recipe for "[Simple Carrot Cake with Cream Cheese Frosting](#)." Atypically, I only altered a couple  
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of things. I grated the rind of the one organic orange in our refrigerator and rubbed that into the sugar, a technique I use often because it really releases the oils from any citrus. I decorated the little cake with four small marzipan carrots, a nod to my Austrian heritage. I always bring back from Austria a couple of boxes of the marzipan carrots and other decorative items and ingredients that I can't find here. My suitcase from a recent trip was filled with toasted hazelnut flour; gray and white poppy seeds; ground poppy seeds (almost like flour, which makes a fantastic torte); Styrian pumpkin oil; Staud's apricot and sour cherry preserves (which have a 70 percent fruit content, and in my opinion are the best available); bars of Zotter artisanal chocolate, and more. Fortunately, I have a large freezer for the flours and seeds, which would go rancid otherwise. I'm really looking forward to traveling again, but for now, I feel incredibly grateful to be just hunkered down while so many people are struggling and sacrificing.



*Carrot cake with marzipan carrots*

### **Resources**

Check out [sunriseflourmill.com](http://sunriseflourmill.com) for organic, stone-ground heritage flours and mixes, and [Zotter Chocolates](http://ZotterChocolates.com) for high-end chocolate for eating and drinking, imported from Austria—I love their bars of classic dark drinking chocolate, which you melt in hot milk and whisk with a tiny whisk that the company sells. Watch for sales! And, I'm all about the hazelnuts! I get all my hazelnuts and toasted ground hazelnuts from [FreddyGuys](http://FreddyGuys.com) in Oregon. They're wonderful!

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**About Jackie Reizes**

Jackie grew up in a hotel-restaurant family and from early teen years lived in Lexington, Massachusetts. During high school, she briefly worked as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant, where she sat after service was completed at a large round table and got to experience authentic Chinese home-cooking. She studied in Vienna, but dropped out to travel throughout Europe, spending time in Crete learning Greek cookery. She has a BA in art history from Boston University and an M.Ed from Lesley University. While a graduate student in Cambridge, she worked as a private cook for a Concord family, catered small dinner parties, and taught inventive cooking classes such as “Packing Your Elegant Tanglewood Picnic” and “Cooking of the Hapsburg Empire.” As an elementary school teacher, she taught at The Common School in the Pioneer Valley, Massachusetts, before moving with her family to Connecticut, where she may often be found in her small but well-stocked kitchen.



*Jackie's kitchen*



*At a Viennese café, Jackie and her husband, guitarist Bill Shute*

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**More tantalizing ideas from Jackie for cooking at home!**



*Sour cherry birthday cake*



*Poppyseed rolls*



*Freezer leftovers for a yummy fried rice during the COVID-19 crisis*