

NOT *everything is* FOR SALE

MALIN ELMLID OF
THE BREAD EXCHANGE
BAKES FOR BARTER
AND ADVENTURE

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One man, not too long ago, made a trade with Malin Elmlid, for one of the baked sourdough loaves she's been bartering for assorted goods and services since 2009.

He said, "If you are ever sad, I'll give you my number to call me at any hour and I will talk to you until your mood is good."

And she hasn't used it. And probably won't.

"It's not very often I have sleepless nights being sad," she says.

This is not a flowery story about a woman who bakes bread. Elmlid's enterprising spirit is founded on curiosity rather than an instinct to nurture through food. "I am never bored," she says, a sentiment we share. I like her after talking for five minutes, long distance with spotty service (she's on holiday

in a remote part of Sweden.) I don't eat bread—I am allergic. I prefer caffeine and candy to food. But, I want to trade, at least stories, with Elmlid.

The baker gig isn't how she supports herself (she's a fashion consultant and working on a book). Calculating the monetary value of the loaves has never been done. They take hours to create with a technique that took two years to perfect. Mastering this process came out of Elmlid's desire to eat everything she liked, but only of the best quality—or made by someone she loves. She first had this sort of sourdough (fermented and healthy with benefits like those of kimchi or sauerkraut) when she was in Copenhagen en route to Berlin. Finding baking mentors was easy. "It's a matter of how you ask and how interested and genuine you are," she says. It's fitting that the Danish city was where she first encountered the legendary bread.





Hazard a guess at the one person who continues to come up when she mentions what it is exactly that she does.

Karen. Blixen. The Danish writer and adventurer, also known as Isak Dinesen.

Elmlid cites the *Seven Gothic Tales* as an inspiration for her, as she travels on business and sometimes bread one hundred and seventy days of the year. It's worth mentioning the inevitable, an allusion to Blixen's fabled food story, *Babette's Feast*. Remember, though, this is not that story. More important to Elmlid is Blixen as a reference for "her daring and curiosity... very new thinking," and adventures in Africa. Elmlid suffers from her own sort of wanderlust. Now, Stockholm-based, among her favorite destinations is her parent's summer house on the Swedish coast, where she is when we speak.

Elmlid quotes Blixen, "'The cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears or the sea.'"

And agrees, "This is exactly what cures me the most." Like Blixen, Elmlid also has an appreciation for interiors, as she does for fashion. "It's very meditative to think about colors. I have a high sensitivity for them." This carries over to baking. The bread comes in all colors. There is one made with turmeric, apricot, hazelnuts and honey called the Moonraker Sourdough, which recreates the palette in the 1979 Bond film. Another is an ombré pink, meant to mimic the Los Angeles sunset (red beet). "It's very rare for me not to get inspiration from my surroundings. It would be terrible to lose that sense. That's really my fuel. It saves you in any situation." The

curiosity is the sustenance, not the bread. Elmlid pursues trades as a passion. "It's sometimes hard for people to understand that if someone is willing to connect with unknown people outside the usual social media frames, then this person must be searching for friends, 'social-hungry.' This does not suit me at all." Elmlid met some of her dearest friends through this process. "I am curious about what makes people happy. People bring me what they are proud of." It's something that's impossible to involve in evaluation. Elmlid's first trade was with a man who offered her tickets to see his father play the viola at the Berlin Philharmonic. "I thought it was crazy someone had given me something so valuable."

She's since traded for travel experiences and objects or art, from jam to children's drawings. Baking has even taken Elmlid to Kabul, Afghanistan, where she imported her knowledge of dough to a collective of bakers, which did not allow men. There, bread is central to the food culture and women connect in communal bakeries. "We discussed relationships and made fun of the annoying humor that our boyfriends and husbands sometimes have, everyday things, that we all share around the world," she says. "It is easy to forget that these women are so close to us." Each relationship begins with Elmlid's immediate intention to give regardless of the get.

"My project is based on trust. There is no history in the exchanges. There is also no future."

It's a one-time gamble and soon the original goods are gone.

For more on Elmlid's project, visit Thebreadexchange.com.

