



THE BREAD EXCHANGE

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Question: What do a twenty-two course dinner, a child's drawing, and a guitar lesson have in common?

Answer: They are all items that people have traded for a loaf of Malin Elmlid's sourdough bread.

It's a beautiful sourdough bread: aesthetically pleasing, slowly fermented, using high quality ingredients and no added yeast. The kind of bread we would call *real bread*.

But as great as all of that is, the true magic begins only after Malin pulls the bread out of the oven in her Berlin home.

She doesn't keep the bread herself, nor does she sell it for profit.

She trades it.

Once a week, the day after she bakes the bread, Malin notifies her group of bread lovers on her Facebook page and email newsletter and then waits for people to come and trade something for the bread.

Malin's project, [The Bread Exchange](#), began in 2008 as a way to distribute the results of her newly found obsession with sourdough bread baking.

"There is only so much my friends and neighbors can eat", Malin says.

Her trades are open for everyone and every trade gets accepted on a first come first served basis. Despite this open format, almost every one of the transactions has been a success in everyone's mind.

People are nice. Or maybe projects like this gather a special group of like-minded people who value other people's time and effort.

Either way, today, about 1,400 trades later, Malin still seems passionate about it and the connections she has built — one loaf of bread at a time.

After a few back and forth emails in the past year or two, this August, our schedules final-

ly matched, and I had the chance to chat with Malin about the project and the book it has lead her to write. Malin was just about to leave on a vacation and answered her phone at the Berlin airport, and so we talked all the way through her security control, only finishing the call as the plane was about to take off.

"Bread was the starting point for the project", Malin told me and continued to explain how everything started from the need to make good bread, but soon became something bigger than just bread: human connection, brought together by bread.

"Bread is like a carrier or communicator. It is a communication tool that people understand — it doesn't matter which religion, what class or heritage we are from. It's understood and valued by everyone." Malin says.

These days, when good bread is so hard to come by with, people value it, simultaneously as a staple and a luxury product.

"It puts bread on a quite high pedestal in that sense. I don't think I could have done this with any other food. It would not have been so understood. You can compare it with wine but wine cuts out the whole arabic islamic world. Bread is unique."

I feel this statement is important as it seems to be at the heart of what Malin is doing with her project: The Bread Exchange isn't an alternative to the monetary system and Malin isn't a hippie anti-capitalist advocating for the sharing economy. In fact, one



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could argue that as a business professional with a degree in network management and a working background in the fashion industry, Malin is quite an unlikely person to start a bread bartering project.

She is in this for the connections, the communication and the stories that come from sharing bread with strangers. Maybe even to add a missing piece to the money-driven world of fashion business.

There is a time and place for money and Malin (or me, for that matter) certainly wouldn't want to make all her purchases through trades and barterers, but, she says, "If you are only dealing with money, and everything gets valued in money, you are missing good people, you're missing good intentions and stories and honesty and connection."

"It's not a political statement or a protest against money in any way. But it's definitely added an aspect to my life."

With money comes anonymity, which, as Malin explains, can be a positive thing:

"You don't want to trade with your landlord. You don't want to trade with the gas company. You don't want to trade with... There's a lot of people out there you don't want to get involved with"

But at the same time, while money and the anonymity that comes with it make things easier, it lacks some of the direct involvement with people.

"If you can make 20% of your exchanges or purchases with people you want to work with and give what you have, you are getting so much more. Because people give more", Malin says.

This is why Malin always spends at least half a day doing the trades.

Every trader has a story to tell and she wants to be able to hear it: Why did he or she pick this item for trade? What is its meaning for the person?



Likewise, the bread tells its own story: the ingredients are mostly received in earlier trades in exchange for bread.

"My bread is a carrier of tales. Because tales, for me, are the most complex and fascinating flavour enhancer there is. And it is this fourth secret ingredient that makes it special; the tales from good people I have met along the journey." Malin writes on her web site.

Things get interesting as people stop thinking about money. Trades become gifts, and gifts, as we all know, are a lot more valuable than simple monetary transactions.

"A bad trade is when someone is just thinking about what a bread is worth and makes the trade based on that. Then you are back in the monetary system and you could just as well work with money." Malin says.

"When people don't think about money, and simply think about these two questions: 'What do I have that I want to share?' and 'What does this person need? How can I make something better for her?' then you have a good trade."

And that has nothing to do with the price.

"It's fun to tell about the incredible trades you get for one bread, but at the same time, I think the beauty at this is the variety and

diversity of the trades." Malin says and goes on to share one of her favorite trades: how a single mom from Berlin used the exchange as a way to teach her two children about the value of things and appreciation by passing the task of deciding what to trade to them.

"It was great to see what they had been thinking about. And that is for me just as an inspiring trade as when someone decides to fly me somewhere." Malin says.

People give what they can afford and what feels right for them, but in the end, what matters the most is the emotion and thinking behind the trade.

On her web site, Malin describes good trades as something made with dedication or bought with good intention. For example a good book, some quality food, or even a guitar lesson.

"When you just think about giving and with good intentions, there's always a good story to it."

And as we have already seen, stories is what this is all about.

Since the very first trades, Malin has been collecting stories about her exchanges and sharing them on her blog.

"It's so egoistic just doing this small bread ex-



Normally, Malin doesn't trade her bread in exchange for someone else's bread, but this one was an exception: a 100% rye sourdough bread brought to her by [a food blogger from Finland](#).

Originally from Sweden but having lived abroad for 14 years, Malin calls the dark rye bread her comfort bread:

"It's the kind of bread I was brought up with."

change in Berlin and wherever I travel. It's tied to me and that feels not fair", she says.

As the blog gathered more visitors and the word spread, the Bread Exchange also caught the attention of the American publishing company Chronicle Books (it's the same company that publishes Chad Robertson's *Tartine* books, by the way!). And so, out of the blue, in 2012, Malin got a message from the publisher, asking her if she was interested in writing a book.

"It wasn't my idea. I was working and just doing this for fun on my blog when I got an offer to write a book about it." Malin says.

A trip to San Francisco to meet with the publisher convinced her: she would be allowed to make the book in the same spirit of the bread exchange itself, and with full creative control up to the level of choosing the colors by picking them from a loaf of bread.

I'm still waiting for my copy — [the Bread Exchange book](#) will be published on October 7th — but what I found most interesting about it is that it seems like a true continuation of the Bread Exchange project: The book is a result of collaboration with photographers, designers and other great people sharing their work and skills without money switching hands.

Everything was done through exchanges and bartering. Bread was involved. Mutual help and transfer of knowledge was a big part of it.

"Doing this, I know you can definitely do it only once. Money has its advantages and I want to pay a fair price for people's work. But I couldn't really do it with this book because the authenticity of this project would not have come through if this would have been a paid thing." Malin says.

The book, just like the Bread Exchange itself is not a bread making book in the usual sense. Beginning with a larger section on bread, it quickly moves to talking



about the people, talking "about the people that I met and the places that I went to, what they brought to me rather than my bread being brought to them." Malin says.

"This book is about bread as a door-opener rather than it being a recipe book."

Malin says she wants her book to inspire people.

And as her example shows, trading without using money really has its advantages. So, maybe, if you are looking for ways to get rid of all that extra bread but don't want to turn it into a business, this could be your route. It has clearly worked for Malin.

You don't have to make your project open for everyone either: Malin suggests thinking of people you like and then trading in a closed circle. "People are always good at some things another person is not. We are all good at something." She says.

And the next time she is town, who knows, maybe you'll be trading with her...



This version of Malin's signature bread, "The Bread Exchange Sourdough" is colored black using charcoal she traded from Japan.