

INTERVIEW Tim Lewis  
PHOTOGRAPH Mirjam Wählen

## One baker, 12 countries, 1,400 loaves: *the bread revolution*

Malin Elmlid swapped  
a homemade loaf for a  
concert ticket. Little did  
she know it was the first  
step on a global journey

**T**he Germans – as always – have a great word for it: *kompromisslosigkeit*. It translates as “a refusal to make compromises” and it is one quality, Malin Elmlid believes, that all great bakers share. She saw it in Tartine Bakery’s Chad Robertson, the San Francisco-based guru of sourdough, and in a group of local women in Kabul, Afghanistan. *Kompromisslosigkeit* is a recurring feature throughout Elmlid’s new book, *The Bread Exchange*, which is an exotic travelogue, sociological experiment and collection of recipes – as well as a testament to the unifying global power of the staff of life.

And Elmlid, a 34-year-old Swede who now lives in Berlin, clearly has a streak of *kompromisslosigkeit* herself. She set her alarm for 5am to pummel a wodge of dough so it would have the perfect elasticity for a photo shoot. When I suggest her commitment may not be obvious in the published pictures, she looks back with pity and confusion. No

matter, too, that – because Elmlid is on the road – she has no way of actually baking the dough she has been diligently nurturing for the last three days.

“I feel bad I don’t have any bread for you,” says Elmlid, taking a seat at Caravan restaurant in King’s Cross. There are three of us at the table: Elmlid, myself and a jar of suppurating sourdough starter, which travels most places with her and which she sometimes refers to as “he”. “He is very ...” she laughs, “sorry, it is very well-behaved, it can be weeks in the fridge.”

Before the Bread Exchange was a website and then a book, it was a manifesto. In 2007, Elmlid started making her own sourdough, mostly as a relief from her day job in the fashion industry. She quickly grew more serious and skilled, and her apartment became full of more bread than she knew what to do with. A friend-of-a-friend of hers received a loaf in 2009 and as a thank you offered Elmlid a spare ticket to a concert

by the Berlin Philharmonic. She started to wonder what else she might swap for bread.

Five years on, Elmlid has made more than 1,400 trades in more than a dozen countries: in reciprocation, she has had her bicycle fixed and taken guitar lessons; she has bartered bread for two kilos of quince and a handmade suitcase from Alstermo Bruk. Money has never changed hands. The motto of the project became: “Everything is not for sale.”

A simple idea has fired the imagination of many people in ways Elmlid didn’t expect – and never intended. As she explains in the book’s introduction: “I didn’t start the project for any of the obvious DIY reasons, or because of the economic crisis in 2008; it wasn’t inspired by religion and it wasn’t a backlash against our consumer society.”

Elmlid did not want to change the world then, but what were her hopes for the Bread Exchange? “It’s not a hippie idea,” she says. “I am someone who is very curious about





The Bread Exchange's Malin Elmlid  
in Berlin, where her project began.



# RULES FOR DISTINGUISHING SUPERIOR GINGER BEER

**RULE 1:**  
IT SHOULD BE  
BOTANICALLY BREWED

**RULE 2:**  
IT SHOULD ONLY CONTAIN  
NATURAL INGREDIENTS

**RULE 3:**  
IT SHOULD FEATURE IN  
THE ILLUSTRATION BELOW



FOLLOW these simple rules  
and you will no longer have to suffer  
inferior ginger beer.

YOU can be sure that any ginger  
beer complying with the rules will  
have a deep, rich mouthfeel, three-  
dimensional taste and a superior hit  
of full flavour.

THIS is the benefit of botanically  
brewing all natural herbs and spices  
in the traditional Fentimans way.

A unique process of milling  
and tumbling, then simmering  
and steaming Chinese ginger  
root before being left to ferment.

IF in any doubt regarding rules  
one and two, always refer to rule three.



people and small details. This was a way of  
combining those things in a very natural  
situation, without anyone feeling screwed.  
Without money, people get to be honest."

Bread, Elmlid insists, has been crucial: its  
value is recognised by all strata of society  
worldwide. "Bread looks different in every  
culture, but it exists in every culture and often  
plays a very large role in people's lives," she  
says. "People without money understand  
bread and even people who are rich  
sometimes can't get it – a place like Berlin, for  
example – because quality bread is so rare."

Elmlid may have had modest ambitions, but  
the project might be quietly revolutionary.  
The cover of her book hints at a lifestyle that  
is glossy and untouchably idyllic, but delve  
into Elmlid's experiences – just one or two  
unsatisfactory trades in more than five years  
– and a reader might develop a surprisingly  
warm picture of human nature. Might we all  
be a little happier if we were prepared to give  
without knowing what we would get in return?

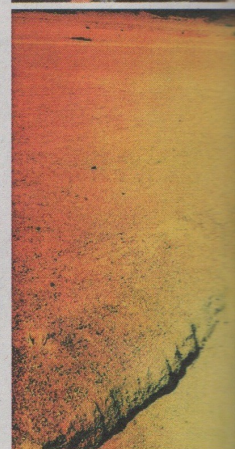
**Elmlid is, in most ways, an unlikely person to  
launch an initiative like the Bread Exchange.**  
"What companies come from Sweden?" she  
says. "Ikea, H&M: we are really good at  
making mainstream products. The Swedish  
mentality, at least when I grew up, was, 'Don't  
be too good. Don't stick out too much.' I'm not  
brought up to take risks at all."

She was born in the remote north of the  
country, in Sjungande Dalen, the "singing  
river valley". Hers was a childhood of playing  
in the forest, hearing and believing magical  
stories. On *midsommar* night, she would – as  
tradition dictates – pick seven flowers, jump  
seven wooden fences and go to bed with the  
petals on her pillow, assured she would dream  
of the person she would eventually marry.

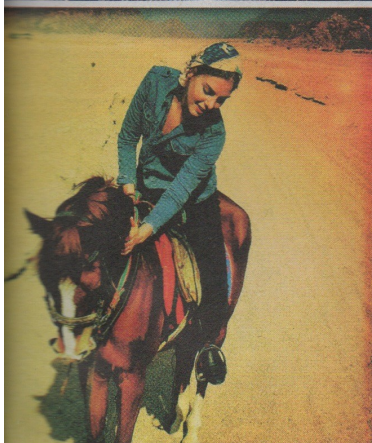
But Elmlid was always a little rebellious.  
Aged 16, she nagged her parents to let her  
study in America and she ended up for a year  
at high school in Columbus, Ohio. After  
university, she went hitchhiking: going  
through Kenya and Tanzania; from Berlin to  
the lakes in northern Italy; from Stockholm  
to Amsterdam in the cabs of trucks. Naturally,  
she didn't tell her cautious, very Swedish  
parents about any of these adventures.

These stories suggest an appetite for risk,  
but Elmlid demurs at this interpretation.  
"When I was hitchhiking, I would not stand  
on the street," she says. "I would make sure I  
was at a gas station where you can see people  
and sense what they're like. You have to trust  
your gut feeling, because not everyone is out  
to be nice. And I would not hitchhike now."

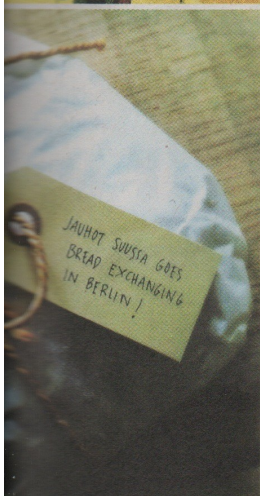
Elmlid is certainly much more pragmatic  
than one might expect an avowed barterer to  
be. Her degree was in business studies and,  
until she quit recently to work full time on the  
book, she was a sales manager for fashion  
labels including the Danish brand Wood  
Wood and Levi's Vintage. If anything, Elmlid's  
experiences doing the Bread Exchange have







Clockwise from top: Elmlid baking in Kabul; with friends in Stockholm; bread from her Bread Exchange project, which has completed over 1,400 trades in a dozen countries; travelling through the Sinai desert, Egypt.



made her more appreciative of the benefits of a conventional economy.

"It's not interesting to me to be a missionary for a new system or attitude to life. Money is great, because money makes us anonymous. What I have really learned is that you don't want to trade with everyone. It is extremely time-consuming and you definitely don't want that connection with everyone – that's just how it is. I have been extremely lucky and in the future I wish I could make 10% of my purchases in exchanges. Then I think I would get something more out of life."

When Elmlid started the Bread Exchange, she appealed for people to swap anything they didn't need. This led to some confusing – and a couple of underwhelming – trades, so she refined the criteria to encourage items "made with dedication" or "bought with good intentions". After that, she found the exchanges became consistently thoughtful and often serendipitous. A South Korean woman gave her edible charcoal powder and one day Elmlid mixed it with vodka and added it to her sourdough mix: the dramatically black Bread Exchange signature loaf was born.

A project that began in Elmlid's Berlin kitchen has now taken her across the world. She went to Kabul in the spring of 2013 with her then boyfriend, a foreign correspondent for *Der Spiegel*, and found she'd "never visited a country where bread played a larger role". Her hope was to show that, even ravaged by conflict, some aspects of daily life – "eating, baking bread, sleeping, making jokes and falling in love" – continue to take place. "War doesn't stop everyone from living," Elmlid notes, "it just raises the stakes of daily life."

On her arrival at the Serena Hotel in Kabul, Elmlid's bread knife was confiscated and she was given a "weapons voucher" to recover it on her departure; in March 2014, a year to the day that she stayed there, a Taliban attack on the hotel resulted in the death of 13 people, including four gunmen. Elmlid, however, was able to get revealing access to a female-only *nanwaae*, or bakery, where women cook the dough in scorching tandoor fires – and then hang around gossiping. "Bread is a very friendly thing to have with you," says Elmlid.

Elmlid maintains that the principal lesson she has taken from the Bread Exchange is to give without expecting anything in return. "You stay happier longer if you think that way," she says. "How painful is it when you are expecting stuff and you don't get it? It's all going to come if you are nice, and the people who do not return it to you, cut them out. It's very easy."

With that, we part, and Elmlid heads towards the kitchen at Caravan to ask if she can borrow their oven to bake her dough. **OFM**

*The Bread Exchange* by Malin Elmlid (Chronicle Books, RRP £21.99) is published on 1 October. To order a copy for £16.99 with free UK p&tp go to [theguardian.com/bookshop](http://theguardian.com/bookshop) or call 0330 333 6846