

# OUT OF AFRICA

In a bowl of sourdough starter, Berlin-based novelist **ANNA WINGER** rediscovered the taste of her childhood in Kenya.

RECENTLY, I MET a woman named Karen, newly transplanted from Los Angeles to Berlin, where I have been living since 2002. She invited me to her house, introduced my girls to her boys, and then pulled me into a pantry where she revealed a bubbling bowl containing what looked like somebody's brain. "My real baby," she said proudly. "I fed it grapes today." She then insisted that I try a warm piece of bread she had baked with it—nobody's brain, it turned out, but homemade sourdough starter. The taste took me back.

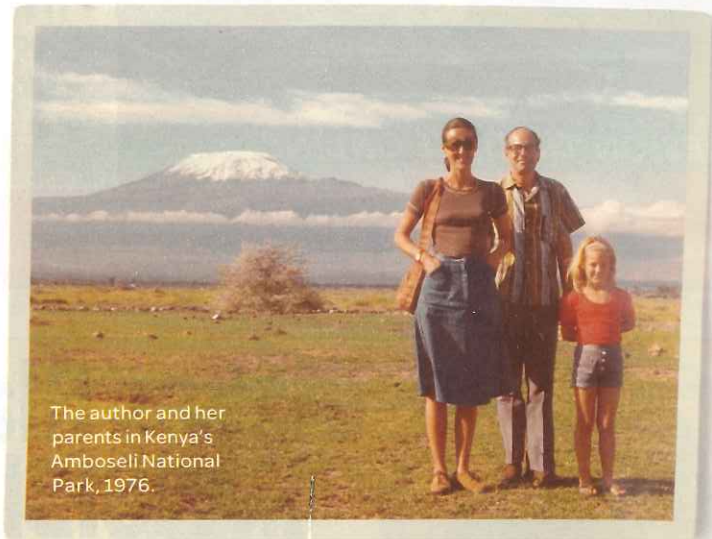
When I was 6, my family lived in Kenya. One weekend, we visited my parents' friends Stuart and Jeanne, American primatologists who were living among baboons in the Amboseli National Park. They observed the baboons from morning till night but took a break on Sundays to make elaborate breakfasts. That Sunday, they served sourdough pancakes with maple syrup—a novelty anywhere in Africa, and one that tastes especially delicious out in the bush. When we left, Stuart gave my mother some of his starter so she could make pancakes for us.

For the rest of my childhood, my mother cared for that starter like a beloved pet. She, too, made pancakes with it and also began baking bread. When we left Kenya for Massachusetts, she dried the starter out, ironed

it, and packed it in her suitcase. After a three-month stopover in England, she revived it with water and flour and carried on. In summer, she brought it to Maine in a jar; in fall, she brought it back to Boston.

My parents, anthropologists, traveled often. Before each trip, my mother ironed the starter again. Her sourdough pancakes were a touchstone in remote locations, a familiar taste that said home is anywhere we are together. Her whole-wheat sourdough bread, in particular, features in pretty much every memory I have of eating as a kid: school lunches, picnics, celebratory dinners. When I was in boarding school, she dropped off loaves for my dorm on Sundays.

Early man, before he figured out how to make fire by friction or flint, had to keep a found flame going at all times. Likewise, my mother did not know that it was possible to create a starter from scratch, but rather believed that what she had was a direct descendent of the original starter, which she assumed was born in San Francisco during the Gold Rush. She felt that Stuart and Jeanne had entrusted her with their starter as if it were holy water from



The author and her parents in Kenya's Amboseli National Park, 1976.

the Ganges, and she pledged to protect it with her life.

The summer of 1978, my mother went camping in Vermont with her friend Barbara. They picked blueberries and made the sacramental pancakes over a fire and decided that someday they were going to start a restaurant. They would serve all their favorite meals, starting with this breakfast. Barbara took some of the starter back to Los Angeles, and from then on they traded recipes by post. When I married some 20 years later, Barbara gave me a collection of recipes from the mythical restaurant, including the pancakes and the whole-wheat bread.

But by then the Amboseli starter was gone. Sometime in the '80s, my mother, like so many confused acolytes before her, discovered the truth. Sourdough starters are not necessarily passed down through the ages. In fact, the Amboseli starter had been started in Atlanta, in Stuart's kitchen, in 1968. And as soon as she learned that she could replace the starter, my mother chucked it. But she never

did replace it. She had always liked the idea of sourdough more than the taste, she admitted, and anyway, her kids were grown.

A childhood spent abroad has its own beauty, but traditions can be difficult to maintain in new locations. Perhaps sourdough is ideal for the peripatetic family. After all, the craft of cooking with it made its way from ancient Egypt to Europe to California. The starter I grew up with went from the United States to Africa and back again. Until I met Karen and her grape-fed cauldron I had all but forgotten the taste of it, but she gave me some, and now I can make my mother's recipe from Africa for my daughters in Berlin. Because home is anywhere we are together, even here.

*Anna Winger is the author of the novel This Must Be the Place (Riverhead) and the creator of Berlin Stories for NPR (berlinstories.org).*