

Baking Bread Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Rick Robinson** (January 17, 2024)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to work from home, I started baking bread — mostly sourdough, but also pizzas, bagels and biscotti. Baking seemed like a good creative outlet and diversion from the siren call of the computer that was always aglow in my home office. This hobby also had the added benefit of providing a tasty reward.

Because I started this endeavor in the 38th year of my legal practice, I cannot say baking suddenly made me a better lawyer. Certainly, I wouldn't want my prebaking clients to think they had been settling for half a loaf.

On the other hand, being a lawyer undoubtedly made me a better baker.

It's All About the Culture

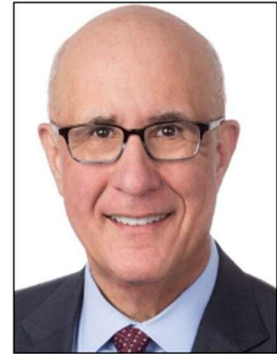
A successful legal practice requires assembling and nurturing the right team and developing a culture in which the team members can reach their full potential. The same is true in baking. High-quality ingredients lead to high-quality breads. And one of the most important ingredients is yeast.

These microscopic organisms are recruited from the air around us but can only survive if properly and continuously nourished in a hospitable environment. Once they are recruited into a well-maintained sourdough starter or "culture," they can do the literal heavy lifting of making bread rise.

Sourdough cultures can contain as many as 70 different strains of yeast, plus numerous types of lactic acid bacteria.[1] The yeast causes the dough to rise by emitting carbon dioxide, and the bacteria contribute to the "sour" taste of the bread.

Bakers try to manipulate the flavor of their bread by adjusting the ratio of yeast to bacteria in the culture. One way this is done is by using different flours to feed the sourdough starter. Using only white flour to build a culture leads to a different flavor profile than if one uses whole wheat flour or rye flour, or a combination of all three. Flour diversity can create more flavorful bread. Maybe the yeast is trying to teach us something.

All of this is not to say that law firm associates should be treated like single-cell fungi — although I have known many law firm partners who seem to harbor such thoughts. Rather, the point is that a successful law practice has to be committed to the continued education and training of its legal talent in an environment that allows each of its members to become



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better lawyers and better human beings.

Management consultant Peter Drucker is often credited with saying, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." I am sure he had a nice baguette in mind when he coined that phrase.

A Recipe Only Gets You So Far

Most baking endeavors begin with a recipe, a list of ingredients and detailed instructions on how the ingredients should be combined, fermented, shaped and baked. The basic ingredients are flour, water, yeast and salt.

Step-by-step instructions tell you how to combine the various ingredients, how long the bread needs to sit so that the yeast can do its job (i.e., fermentation), how the bread should be shaped into something that eventually will look like a loaf, and the time and temperature for the actual baking process.

This is all critical information, but you cannot blindly follow the formula. A recipe only tells you what might happen if you follow the prescribed steps; it can't guarantee that the end product will be something worth eating. You have to look to see what is actually happening to the dough and judge for yourself when it is ready to be baked.

Just because the recipe says the dough should be ready for baking after four hours, you still must decide for yourself if it has fully proofed. Likewise, many recipes assume that your kitchen temperature is a constant 75 degrees Fahrenheit, so you must make adjustments in the heat of summer and the cold of winter.

The need to adjust to real-time events is crucial in the practice of law, too. For example, you can go into a deposition with a fantastic outline of questions to ask the witness, but the outline won't guarantee you will get any useful information from the deponent. You have to pay attention to what is happening in the room.

Did the witness answer the question you asked? Did they try to qualify their answer in a way that makes it less helpful to your case? The outline you (or your associate) so meticulously prepared can't tell you what to do when the witness doesn't want to follow your script. You need to pay attention to events as they happen and adjust.

Be Prepared to Fail

I have baked many epically bad loaves of bread. Some barely rose in the oven, looking more like Frisbees than boules. More than once, I've doubled a recipe but forgot to double a key ingredient like the salt, which led to a very bland loaf.

I've experimented with new types of flour that couldn't absorb the amount of water called for in the recipe, which left me with a soupy mess. Let's not even talk about the perils of scoring bread — the process of slashing the bread with a razor so that the carbon dioxide emitted by the yeast has an escape route and doesn't blow a hole out of the side of your loaf. Let's just say I've had many blowouts.

Fortunately, many ugly loafs still taste pretty good, and you can usually slice around the really bad parts.

In baking, bad loaves are inevitable, because the more you bake, the more you will want to experiment with new recipes, new types of flour and new baking equipment. While all of this

can be great fun, the baking experience can be extremely humbling.

Humility is not a quality found in abundance in the legal community, which is one good reason why more lawyers should bake — or play golf, which, at least for me, has an even higher rate of failure.

The question in baking, as in legal practice, is: What will you learn from your failures? Can you figure out what went wrong and what you can do to avoid similar problems in the future? Can you admit that you need to do something different to achieve the results you and your clients desire?

Albert Einstein is often credited with saying, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." There is no evidence he actually said this, but either way, the aphorism applies to baking as much as it applies to the practice of law.

Be Patient

Time is a critical element of every baking recipe. The amount of time it takes to bake a loaf of bread depends on numerous factors, including the vitality of your sourdough starter, the temperature of the ingredients incorporated into your dough, and the temperature of the room in which the dough will rise. Even the altitude can make a difference — just check the directions on a box of cake mix for an example of how this works.

While you can control some of these factors, at the end of the day you need to be patient and let the yeast do its job, however long it takes. For lawyers who are used to pulling out all the stops to reach their desired outcomes as quickly as possible, baking can provide an important lesson on how to slow down and live in the moment.

One of the great terrors of baking arises from the use of a Dutch oven as a baking vessel. The theory behind this technique is that by baking the bread in a closed container you can capture all the steam coming out of the bread when it hits the hot oven, which keeps the outer layer of the dough pliable enough to expand before it develops its hard crust.

But once you put your lidded vessel into the oven, you can't see what is happening to the dough. You must wait at least 20 minutes before you can remove the lid and see if all your hard work paid off with a full rise. When I am counting down the minutes until the big reveal, I feel like I'm living in the scene from the movie "Apollo 13," where the astronauts have circled around the dark side of the moon and no one in mission control knows if the astronauts are still alive.

Or, to employ a more legalistic analogy, these 20 minutes are like waiting for a jury to return its verdict — except the jurors are the yeast, which is now in complete control of the outcome. Over time, however, I have learned to stop catastrophizing about what might be going wrong with my dough and to simply wait for the process to run its course.

Build Community

There is a huge, online community of bakers sharing recipes, advice and pictures of their loaves. I have joined several chat groups devoted to baking, taken several online baking courses, and listened to numerous podcasts in which professional bakers discuss what drew them to this line of work.

It's been great to get involved with a community of people with shared interests that have

nothing to do with the law — although, there is more law surrounding baking than you might think. But that is a subject for a different article.

Within my legal community, primarily among my law firm colleagues, my baking has had the very tangible benefit of providing my colleagues with the fruits of my labors. And, besides the joy of gifting, the principal benefit I get from sharing freshly baked bread, bagels, and biscotti with my co-workers is that I don't eat everything I bake. So, everyone wins when I bake.

Conclusion

After many years practicing law and a few years practicing baking, I have learned that the keys to success in both endeavors include building a culture that is nourishing and resilient, paying attention to the here and now, learning from failure, practicing patience, and building community.

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[1] American Society for Microbiology, "The Sourdough Microbiome," June 26, 2020, available at <https://asm.org/articles/2020/june/the-sourdough-microbiome#:~:text=They%20found%20over%2070%20different,geographic%20location%20due%20to%20climate>.