

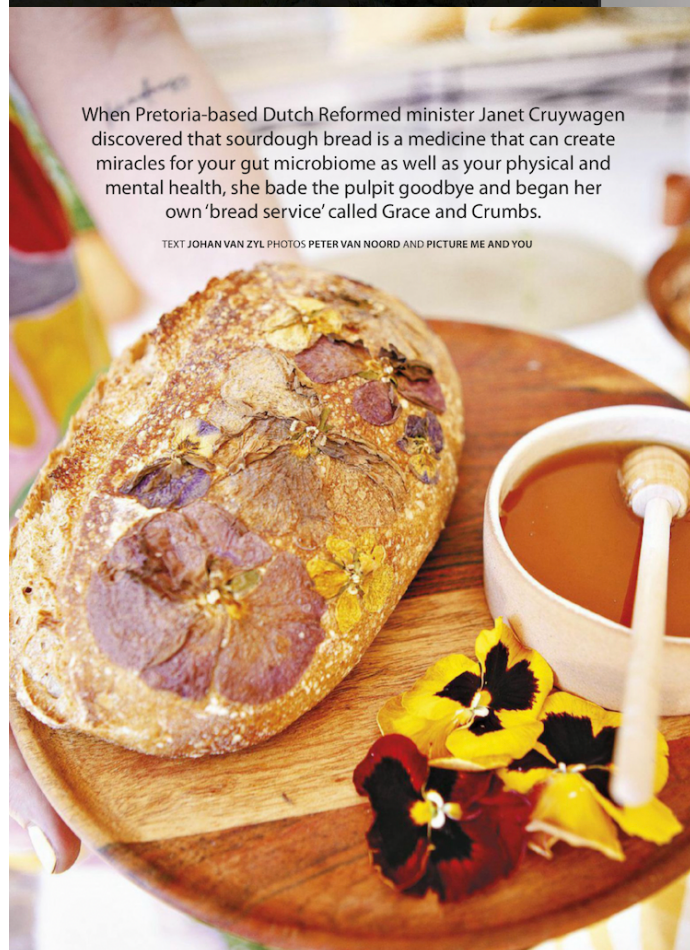
As seen in Platteland Magazine



ENTREPRENEUR



After attending a course run by British food activist Vanessa Kimbell, former minister Janet Cruywagen firmly believes that sourdough bread isn't just healthy food; it's essential preventive nutrition.



When Pretoria-based Dutch Reformed minister Janet Cruywagen discovered that sourdough bread is a medicine that can create miracles for your gut microbiome as well as your physical and mental health, she bade the pulpit goodbye and began her own 'bread service' called Grace and Crumbs.

TEXT JOHAN VAN ZYL PHOTOS PETER VAN NOORD AND PICTURE ME AND YOU



The Bible contains more than 350 references to bread, so it's not that much of a leap for a young minister from the Jacaranda City to exchange the pulpit for her own sourdough school and home bakery, which is what Janet Cruywagen did in 2021.

Over the past decade – since the publication of the Banting Bible *The Real Meal Revolution* (2013) by Professor Tim Noakes et al – bread has developed a reputation as the evil, belly-inducing king of carbs that raises our blood sugar levels, makes us obese, and sends us to an early grave.

But food activist Dr Vanessa Kimbell from Northamptonshire in England has since proved

scientifically that there is a huge difference between refined commercial bread baked with instant yeast versus fibre-rich fermented sourdough bread, which is nutritious and easy to digest. She calls sourdough bread "lifestyle medicine", a holistic medical approach that uses evidence-based behavioural interventions, such as changes in diet and lifestyle, to prevent, treat and manage chronic disease.

Vanessa's research and doctorate degree led to her Baking as Lifestyle Medicine (BALM) framework, a system of baking, eating and sharing healthy sourdough bread as preventative healthcare, improving gut health, mental wellbeing and overall health. (Read the box "Bread as balm: 7 principles" on page 46.)

The Covid-19 turning point

During the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021, home-made sourdough bread (and much faster banana bread!) exploded suddenly when people had more time for old-fashioned and slower processes that can't be hurried, such as sourdough, which is made only with flour, water and salt. Baking was both a creative outlet and a form of therapy to counteract the uncertainty and stress of the pandemic.

Few people understand this more deeply than Janet Cruywagen. "Like the rest of the world, I also jumped onto the banana bread and sourdough bandwagon. I was especially scared of sourdough and had visions of a Tamagotchi that would die if it wasn't properly cared for. Then my sister-in-law, Babet Becker, gave me a sourdough starter

as a gift. I christened her Grace," Janet remembers.

As the third minister of the Vallesig Dutch Reformed Church in Pretoria, Janet was responsible for serving the elderly, but as the virus increasingly claimed older members, she sometimes found herself holding between four and six funerals a week.

"Supporting dying people and their families day after day, living the trauma of the grieving process over and over again, eventually made me feel unbelievably depressed. It was during this time that I began experimenting with my starter and experienced for myself how therapeutic bread-baking can be. I woke up at 04:00 in the morning to start... working with your hands in that silence has an instantly calming effect. Sourdough

makes you work more slowly and attentively."

In November 2019, Janet and her husband, Naudé, a computer engineer, and their son, Eduan, moved to a new house in Faerie Glen. On their second night there, the neighbours brought over a plate of cooked food and the next day Janet returned the favour with the first of many sourdough loaves.

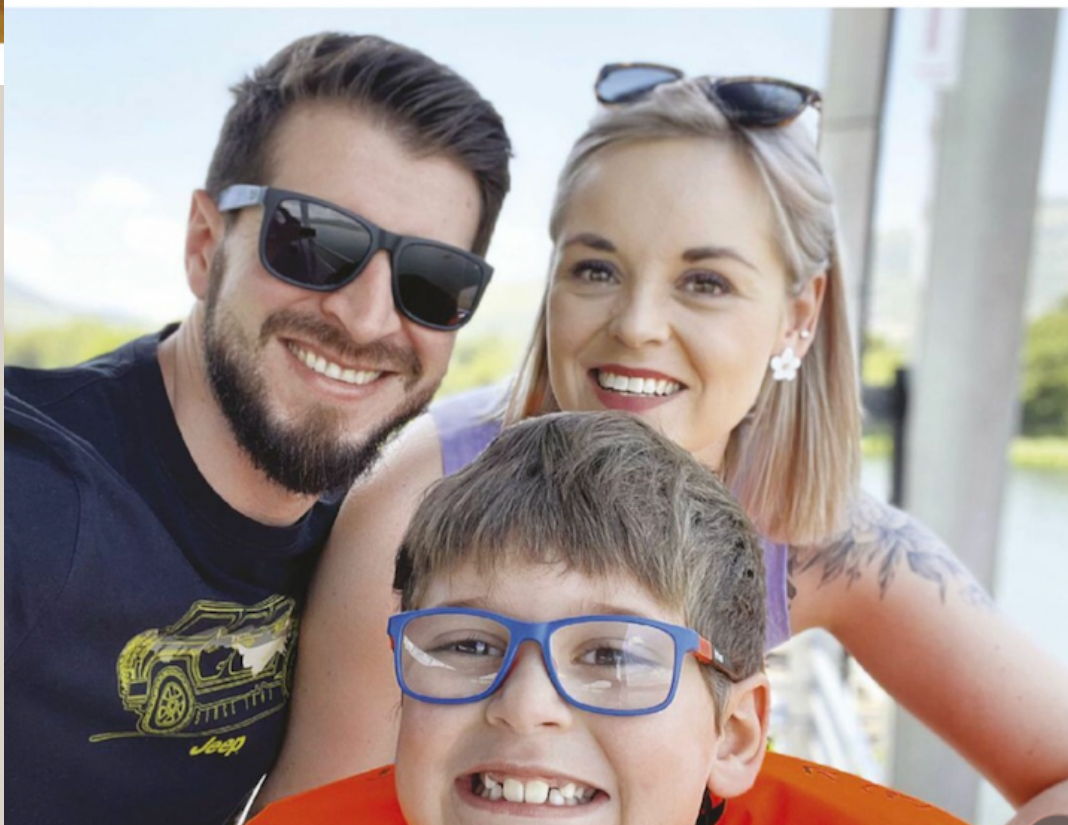
"They asked me why I didn't take orders and charge a fee for my bread. I then started a WhatsApp group and it slowly grew – I was baking up to 30 loaves a week, the most my fridge could manage."

The culture of sourdough

In the meantime, Janet increasingly immersed herself in the sourdough culture and read many books, >

OPPOSITE Janet has been experimenting with various types of locally produced stoneground flour brands since 2020: Eureka, Millstone, Champagne Valley and Lowerland. For her own baking and home-based workshops, she only uses Gideon Milling's stoneground flour. You can find it at most Checkers stores and selected Spars in the Western Cape and Gauteng. Find out more at gideonmilling.co.za.

BELOW Janet and her husband, Naudé, a computer engineer and avid base guitarist, with their son, Eduan, who inspired his mother's mission to find the healthiest bread possible.



BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Janet's healthy and artfully adorned breads; the pizza oven in her yard was built by the team from Millstone, led by the late Johan Stapelberg; "Crumbs are often thrown away, but they can be used in a variety of ways," Janet explains in reference to the name of her business, Grace and Crumbs. (From September, she will be offering workshops at Crust and Crumb in Melville, Johannesburg.)

OPPOSITE Janet encourages creativity in baking and presentation, and workshop attendees are given free rein in the focaccia classes she's been running from her home.

including Dr Vanessa Kimbell's *The Sourdough School: The Ground-breaking Guide to Making Gut-friendly Bread*. At her Sourdough School in England, Vanessa researches how to improve the nutritional value and digestibility of sourdough bread, something that interests Janet because Eduan refuses to eat anything other than cheese sandwiches, pizza and pasta. Last year a paediatric neurologist officially diagnosed him as neurodiverse and since last May he has attended primary school at the Wonderfully Made Center, where high-functioning learners with autism and Asperger's are given the chance to flourish.

"I was shocked when I read the long list of ingredients on the packaging of so-called sourdough bread that's baked on a large scale and sold in local supermarkets.

There is not supposed to be anything other than flour, water and salt in sourdough," says Janet.

She was therefore very keen to complete Vanessa's two-year online certificate course in Baking as Lifestyle Medicine to help her turn her family's, and specifically Eduan's, food into something that would feed both body and brain. The terrible pound-and-exchange rate made the course unaffordable but she did attend one of Vanessa's free webinars during the lockdown. At the end of that session, Vanessa mentioned that bursaries were available to bakers who could not afford the course fee, so Janet sent an email that told her story.

"Vanessa actually replied and we had a video call the next day. For her, nutritious sourdough bread is a basic human right and, as our most affordable staple food, it >



should be accessible to everyone. She also believes that we should share our knowledge with others."

Janet explained that she dreamt of her own sourdough school where she could offer hands-on workshops, as well as that she was involved with the charity organisation Echo Youth Development, where she empowers vulnerable young adults to lead healthier lives. She received a full bursary from Vanessa and in September she will travel to Sicily, along with 45 other sourdough bakers from around the world, for the graduation ceremony.

Janet says that Vanessa's personal journey to becoming an international sourdough activist began in southwestern France in the early '80s when she trained and worked as a baker for a long time. But in England, after taking a course of very strong antibiotics, Vanessa found that she suddenly couldn't eat the bread available there and she began to follow a gluten-free diet. A few years later she returned

to France where she discovered that she experienced no negative side effects when she ate the slow-fermented French bread she had grown up with.

In the early 2000s, very little information was available about sourdough or the impact of antibiotics on the microbiome but, as a trained baker, Vanessa had a strong suspicion that the fermentation process changed the structure of the bread.

She writes on her blog: "Bread is our most basic staple food. Once you understand that the microbes in the soil affect the levels of nourishment in the grain, you begin to connect to agri-economic systems. And as you realise that these same families of microbes in the starter damage the gluten, break down the anti-nutrients, predigest the sugars and make the bread easier to digest and more nutritious, you will rethink the way you bake. As you learn that the microbes in our guts manufacture the metabolites that our brains

need to function from the fibre in the grains we eat, then you will make the link and realise that we are symbiotic.

"The bread we eat is part of a system, and to be truly nourished, every part of the way we bake, eat and share bread needs to be in sync."

This is how the Baking as Lifestyle Medicine (BALM) protocol slowly took shape during the sourdough classes that Vanessa has offered since 2002.

"When you bake according to BALM, you are actively synchronising the system. Avoiding ultra-processed bread, eating more fibre, connecting to the people in your community, and living a more Mediterranean lifestyle have a positive impact on both your physical and mental health and on the people you feed. Being a baker, you are actually disrupting the conventional food system where the majority of bread and baked goods damage our health, and the health of the planet." >



Janet in the room where her oven, mixer and stocks are kept and where, until recently, she gave her classes. The oven was given to her as a gift from a friend who closed her bakery.

Janet slices one of her loaves for Platteland to taste.

"Bread gathers people around a table," she says. "You eat it with your hands and you share it with others, and you always bake a loaf to give away. And I have discovered that you can add sourdough to so many things to make them healthier: pancake batter, pizza or pasta dough, pumpkin tart. I also make my own granola by mixing oats, seeds, nuts, a little honey and sourdough starter, then slowly bake it in the oven."

IN MARCH 2021, Janet decided to leave the ministry because, among other reasons, she had been approached by a restaurant and deli that wanted to convert its entire existing bread range to sourdough. Initially, Janet was only meant to take on a supervisory role, but staff challenges meant that soon she was mixing and shaping bread loaves on her own at 05:00 in the morning. By August 2021, she was completely burnt out and admitted to Denmar Mental Health Clinic.

"I left everything, and I didn't bake for eight months. Grace remained in the fridge. My family and I first had to regain our health," she says. During this time, she received a big gift from a friend who had closed her bakery: a deck oven in which she could bake 12 loaves, along with tins and bowls. She only had to buy an industrial mixer.

"When I was ready to face life again after Denmar, I rediscovered the value of bread therapy. I want to teach the right technique to people when they are young. I think I'm a naturally good teacher and the aim of my workshops, which I offer at my home, is to shift perceptions about bread and empower people to bake bread that relieves the health problems they and their loved ones experience. It's probably because I was once a minister that people readily share their stories... and everyone can just take a deep breath. So many people walk in feeling that they aren't creative or artistic, only to discover wonderful things about themselves. And, hopefully, they also discover that good bread is really good for them."

Bread as balm: 7 principles

Dr Vanessa Kimbell's Baking as Lifestyle Medicine (BALM) protocol is based on seven principles that are adapted to suit personal digestion, microbiome health and genes. Sourdough bread must also promote social equity, environmental awareness and a more balanced relationship between us and our food.

1 Lifestyle changes Vanessa regards sourdough bread as a form of activism. This includes symbiotic eating (ensuring that all your food includes both probiotic bacteria and the prebiotic fibre that is necessary to feed these bacteria and keep them happy), as well as the order in which we consume food during a meal (also known as "sequenced eating" or "food sequencing"), which can influence blood sugar levels and how our bodies digest and metabolise nutrients.

2 Increased fibre in every bread.

3 Increased diversity in every loaf by, among other things, using a variety of different types of stoneground wholegrain flour.

4 Fermentation – different bacteria, yeast and baking methods improve the nutritional value of bread.

5 Higher antioxidant levels – in the flour and through symbiotic eating.

6 Increased probiotics through symbiotic eating and adding living bacteria in the form of cheese, kefir, honey, vinegar, sauerkraut and miso.

7 Reduced refined sugar by choosing malt, maple syrup, honey or treacle. >

Sourdough vetkoek with dhal

As part of the Baking as Lifestyle Medicine course, Janet gave this classic South African staple food a healthier and more affordable twist. Her version contains no instant yeast and a lot more fibre, as well as less sugar and saturated fat to prevent elevated blood sugar levels. The dhal can be made ahead of time and stored in the fridge for a maximum of 3–4 days.

Serves 6–8

Preparation time 2 days

Cooking time 5 minutes

YOU NEED

FOR THE VETKOEK

- 100 g wholegrain leaven (ensure that it is fed and active)
- 350 g stoneground white bread flour
- 100 g unsifted wholegrain flour
- 50 g wholegrain spelt flour

- 110 g water, plus an additional 10–20 g if needed
- 3 eggs plus 1 egg yolk
- 12 g salt
- 100 g butter, cubed
- 50 g honey
- sunflower oil for deep-frying

FOR THE DHAL

- 500 g red lentils, soaked in water for 30 minutes
- 1 can (400 g) brown lentils
- 1 tablespoon (15 ml) olive oil
- 1½ teaspoons (7,5 ml) ground cumin
- 1½ teaspoons (7,5 ml) ground coriander
- 1 teaspoon (5 ml) ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon (5 ml) whole mustard seeds
- 2 curry leaves
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 4–5 garlic cloves, finely chopped

- 1 good piece (5–7 cm) fresh ginger, finely chopped
- 1 large ripe tomato, chopped
- 1–3 fresh chillies to taste
- 1 can (400 g) whole or chopped tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon (15 ml) sesame seeds, lightly toasted in a pan
- 1 cup (250 ml) thick Greek yoghurt or labneh (yoghurt cheese)
- ½ medium cucumber, chopped

THIS IS HOW

Day 1 (08:00) Use a stand mixer with a dough hook to slowly mix all the ingredients for the vetkoek (apart from the butter and honey) for 3–4 minutes until a dough forms. Increase the speed to medium and knead the dough for a further 4–5 minutes to further develop the gluten. Let the dough rest.

Day 1 (08:45) Add a few cubes of butter at a time and knead them in before adding more. Add the honey. Turn the mixer off once all the butter and honey is mixed in and the dough is shiny. Let the dough rest for another 5–10 minutes.

Day 1 (09:00) Perform a window test: Lightly wet your hands, pinch off a piece of dough and slowly stretch it between your fingers. If the gluten has developed sufficiently, it will form a “window” through which you will see the light. If the dough tears immediately, the gluten will need more time. Use the dough hook to knead it again for a few minutes, let the dough rest for another half hour, and do the window test again. Then place the dough in a bowl that has been lightly greased with oil, cover the bowl with a shower cap or a moist dishcloth and let it rise again at about 26°C.

Day 1 (09:30) Perform the first stretch-and-fold: Lift the dough up, fold it in half, turn the dough and fold it again.

Day 1 (10:00) Perform a second stretch-and-fold.

Day 1 (10:30) Place the dough in the fridge to slowly rise for the rest of the day and overnight.

Day 2 (11:00) Remove the dough from the fridge and allow it to reach room temperature.

Day 2 (12:00) Weigh the dough and



shape it into a ball. Sprinkle a thin layer of flour on one or two baking trays.

Day 2 (12:30) Use a dough scraper to cut the dough into pieces of approximately 120 g – you should eventually have 8–10 pieces. Shape each piece into a ball, arrange them on the baking trays and cover them once more to rise for 4–6 hours.

Day 2 (16:00) Start the dhal by soaking the red lentils for 30 minutes.

Day 2 (16:15) Heat 1 tablespoon (15 ml) olive oil in a saucepan, add the cumin, coriander, turmeric, mustard seed, curry leaves and cinnamon sticks and stir-fry everything over a low heat for a few minutes.

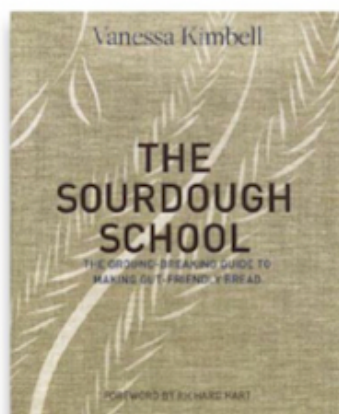
Day 2 (16:30) Add the chopped onion to the spices and continue frying over a low heat until the onion is soft and transparent.

Day 2 (16:45) Add the garlic and ginger and fry them for a few minutes before adding the fresh tomato and chilli. Fry this for a few minutes before adding the tinned tomato and red and brown lentils. Allow to simmer for a few minutes, add a cup of water and salt to taste, and let everything cook over a low heat for 45 minutes, stirring regularly. Add more water if it cooks dry. Toast the sesame seeds and mix them with the Greek yoghurt or labneh, salt to taste, and the chopped cucumber. Place in the fridge.

Day 2 (17:00) Check the progress of the dough while the dhal cooks. Heat the sunflower oil in a large saucepan or deep pan – it will be ready once it reaches 180°C. Fry 2–3 vetkoek at a time for 2 minutes on each side until beautifully golden brown all over. Use a slotted spoon to remove them and allow to cool on a wire rack while you fry the rest.

Serve the vetkoek immediately with the dhal and a glass of white wine, light beer or kombucha.

Store the remaining vetkoek in an airtight container and eat within two days. Heat them, preferably in an air-fryer or oven (or slice them in half and toast them) – don't use the microwave oven for heating.



Find out more about bread as medicine

If you want to learn more about a sourdough starter and sourdough bread, or if you want to chat to Janet about Vanessa Kimbell's books or her course focusing on bread as lifestyle medicine, visit Janet's Grace and Crumbs website or write to her via email.