

## *From The Kitchen at St. Francis Friary, Los Angeles*

I got my Bachelor of Arts degree in Russian from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. People often ask me, why Maine? Why Russian? And I don't really have a good answer. It's just one of many examples in my life of stumbling upon things that end up profoundly affecting me. I can tell you, though, how I came to choose Bates. My guidance counselor in high school suggested that I apply to one more school and I randomly picked out the Bates catalog from his shelf. My one thought in that moment was to pick a school far removed from New York City, where I had lived all my life since my family immigrated to the United States from the Philippines when I was only 1 year old. I didn't expect to get in, but I did. And it changed me in so many ways.

One of the things I particularly appreciated was the opportunity to meet people from other parts of the country with profoundly different life experiences from me. One winter afternoon I was studying at the Frye Street Union, one of the Victorian homes owned by the College and used for student housing but which also happens to have large common spaces for entertaining. A group of us were spread out in front of the fireplace hitting the books. At some point I noticed that one woman in our group was missing. I heard her in the kitchen and wandered in to see what she was up to. And there she was with big bowls spread out in front of her and her hands working away in a little cloud of flour. I had never seen anything like it.

She announced that she was making us biscuits to snack on. I looked around and didn't see a recipe card or cookbook out. She seemed just intuitively to know what to add, how much, and when. Her measuring tools were a coffee cup and a soup spoon right out of the drawer. (So much for the "exact" measurements needed for baking that I would later learn about in culinary school.) I asked where she learned to make biscuits and found out that she had worked on a farm for many years and often spent the mornings making biscuits for the farmhands before heading out herself to work the land.

I was absolutely amazed. This whole world of hers was COMPLETELY foreign to me and seemed like something out of a movie. Remember when Auntie Em handed out homemade crullers to the workers at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz*? That used to just blow right past me. But now whenever I see that movie (which is more often than I care to admit) that little detail always reminds me of that winter day at the Frye Street Union.

I have since lost the recipe I jotted down as I watched her at work. This recipe is one that I have come up with over time. It combines proportions and techniques from different sources. I certainly can't take credit for it, but I'm happy to share what I've learned. The brothers seem to like these. And the best part is that the whole process only takes 30 minutes, and that includes clean up. So it's easy to make for breakfast, and it's easy to double the recipe to feed a crowd alongside a nice pot of chowder or chili.

## **Buttermilk Biscuits**

Preheat your oven to 450 degrees Fahrenheit. Then take 2 ounces of cold, unsalted butter (that's half a stick or 4 Tablespoons), dice it up, and reserve it in the refrigerator. Measure out 1 cup of

cultured buttermilk and reserve that in the refrigerator as well. Have an ungreased baking tray standing by, and pull out a 2-inch biscuit cutter or a glass with relatively straight sides that also measures 2 inches across the top. (When your hands are covered in flour you'll appreciate doing all of this ahead.)

In a large bowl sift together 2 cups of all-purpose flour, 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon of baking powder, 1/4 teaspoon of baking soda, 1 teaspoon of salt, and 1/2 teaspoon of sugar. Next quickly cut in the butter until it looks like crumbs and will clump together when you press a little of the mixture in your hand. I generally do this with my fingertips, but some people use a pastry cutter or two knives that they run against each other through the mixture.

When that is done, form a well in the center of the flour and pour in the buttermilk. Stir with a wooden spoon until just combined. Pour this out onto a well-floured surface and bring it together into a mass. Lightly flour the top of the mass and fold it over on itself. Turn the mass 90 degrees, gather any bits that have fallen onto the surface and sprinkle these on the surface, and fold again. Repeat this for a total of 5 folds.

Pat the dough out with your fingers to about a 1/2 inch thickness. Cut out biscuits and place them on the ungreased baking sheet, aligned so the biscuits just touch each other. Gather your scraps and re-form into a mass, patting out to a 1/2 inch thickness and cut out more biscuits. You should be able to get about 10-12 biscuits from this recipe. (I gather the final remaining scraps and hand-form it into another biscuit shape, which I bake with the others but usually eat myself because it doesn't rise like the others or have the same texture but is perfectly edible.)

Bake the biscuits for 15-18 minutes until they are browned. Allow to cool slightly on the pan before transferring to a plate or basket. These are best served right away but can also be kept in a sealed zip-top bag in the fridge or freezer for longer term storage and then reheated before serving.

~Br. Simon