



BC Centre for Disease Control  
An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

Environmental Health Services

# Food Issue

## Notes from the Field

### Bakery couche (linen)

Request received from:	Regional Health Authority
Date of request:	February 3, 2014
Issue (brief description):	Bakery is not washing proofing linens – is this an unsanitary practice?

*Disclaimer: The information provided in this document is based on the judgement of BCCDC's Environmental Health Services Food Safety Specialists and represents our knowledge at the time of the request. It has not been peer-reviewed and is not comprehensive.*

#### Summary of search information

1. Internet sources: Google search of “bakery linen” or “bakery couche”;[“foodborne illness” AND “bakery couche”= 0 hits]; [“foodborne illness” AND “bread”=nothing significant]
2. PubMed: “foodborne illness” AND “bakery”=2 hits, not related to breads. “illness” AND “bread”=63 hits, 8 related to gastrointestinal illness and bread consumption, but none to baking equipment issues. [3 from food handlers (2 norovirus, 1 *Salmonella* Thompson); 3 from cross-contamination issues with eggs (all *Salmonella* Enteritidis); 1 stuffed bread, agent not specified; 1 *S. Typhimurium* from cross contamination with chicken].

#### Background information

We agree that not washing the cloth is an unsanitary process. The cloth should be treated like a utensil, and properly washed and sanitized. However, it depends on the actual fabric being used for the proofing. Is it a regular tea towel or a “bakery couche”?

“**Bakery couche**” is a term used for fabrics using during proofing (rising) of bread dough. There are 2 types (that we are aware of) used for bakery couches:

- The first type is FLAX LINEN cloths. It is not recommended that this material type be washed as water will change the structure and performance of the material.
- The second material is COTTON CANVAS. This type can be washed (although some recommend that one should avoid washing if possible). If the cotton canvas is washed, then there needs to be an ironing step to prepare it again for bakery use.

According to the advice from this YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZAwSV1VakA>, only lean dough should be used with the bakery couche. Lean dough does not contain enrichment ingredients (i.e., fats and eggs) that would penetrate into the fabric and would presumably lead to sanitary issues. If there are some deposits on the bakery couche material it should be allowed to dry before scraping down, and then proper storage dry storage in a protective container/bag. With proper use and care, there should not be any mould issues.



Image: <http://brickovenbaker.com/oven-and-baking-tools/bannetons/imported-professional-bakers-flax-linen-couche-32-x-34-inches>



<http://www.bakerscouche.com/>

Wet cleaning methods are not used extensively in bread bakeries. Surfaces often get scraped down, swept or vacuumed. This type of sanitation is generally accepted practice as it is not normally a wet environment, and one does not want to introduce moisture into this environment (similar to peanut butter plants, and chocolate plants). Specific equipment and utensils that can be completely washed, sanitized, and dried will get the typical wet sanitation process.

Rather than the cloth going over the bread to proof, bread loaves are positioned in the cloth - to develop a crust in the loaf (photos below are from Google image search for bakery couche).

However, different chef blog sites vary in their advice on whether it is acceptable to wash proofing linens (or not). Linen as a fabric is reported to become more stiff and wrinkly after washing, although this can be remedied by ironing the fabric flat on the steam setting when it is wet. (review this site: <http://cooking.stackexchange.com/questions/24524/what-happens-if-i-wash-my-bakers-couche> ).

#### ***What are the risks associated with unsanitary bakery couche?***

We did not uncover any illnesses associated directly with bakery couche. However, moulds that may grow on cloths will cause quality issues in the final product, through direct contact or cross-contamination. This may affect other products in the bakery, should mould spores come into contact with other foods. However, several bread outbreaks have been linked to eggs and *Salmonella* Enteritidis.<sup>1-3</sup>

#### ***Previous guidance on bakery couche or linen from British Columbia***

None.

#### ***Guidance on bakery couche from the internet***

Additional blog sites talking about washing:

<http://www.thefreshloaf.com/node/9713/caring-your-couche>

<http://cooking.stackexchange.com/questions/24524/what-happens-if-i-wash-my-bakers-couche>

---

*Disclaimer: The information provided in this document is based on the judgement of BCCDC's Environmental Health Services Food Safety Specialists and represents our knowledge at the time of the request. It has not been peer-reviewed and is not comprehensive.*

---

## Recommendations from BCCDC

The visual appearance of a baker's couche is not itself a safety issue, however, proper care of bakery couche to inhibit mould growth is recommended. Our recommendation is that if the premise is using a bakery couche, then:

1. the cloth should be properly scraped down and dried between uses;
2. cotton canvas couches can be washed if needed, and then prepared (ironed) and floured before reuse;
3. flax linen couches may not be washed UNLESS they have become contaminated (e.g., if something is spilled onto them);
4. when cloths become visibly blackened with mould – either throw them out and buy new fabric, or wash them; and
5. rich doughs, i.e., those containing eggs and oils should not be proofed in bakery couche.

## References

1. Much P, Pichler J, Kasper S, Lassnig H, Kornschober C, Buchner A, König C, Allerberger F. A foodborne outbreak of Salmonella Enteritidis phage type 6 in Austria, 2008. *Wien Klin Wochenschr.* 2009;121(3-4):132-6.
2. Food-borne outbreak caused by Salmonella enterica serovar Enteritidis in Bari, Italy. Rizzo C. *Ig Sanita Pubbl.* 2006 Jul-Aug;62(4):399-407.
3. Liu L, He HF, Dai CF, Liang LH, Li T, Li LH, Luo HM, Fontaine R; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Salmonellosis outbreak among factory workers--Huizhou, Guangdong Province, China, July 2004. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2006 Apr 28;55 Suppl 1:35-8

---

*Disclaimer: The information provided in this document is based on the judgement of BCCDC's Environmental Health Services Food Safety Specialists and represents our knowledge at the time of the request. It has not been peer-reviewed and is not comprehensive.*

---