

Old-Fashioned 100 Percent Whole-Wheat Bread

I was living in Santa Cruz, California, and between jobs. So I decided to bake bread every single day. Here was where I first discovered real whole wheat bread with no white flour added. I mastered it first time in the oven and I never make any other whole wheat bread. This is just IT for me. The flavor of this all-whole-wheat loaf is sweet, wholesome, and nutty. The secrets to a moist, fine-textured loaf is a technique known as the sponge method and whole-wheat flour that has been finely ground. The sponge method evenly moistens and slightly ferments whole-grain batter before it is mixed and kneaded. A coarse grind of flour has lots of big bran flecks, which makes for a more crumbly loaf. It is important to retain the moisture in the dough by using plastic wrap during all risings; this prevents the formation of a crust which would dry out the top of the loaf and prevent it from attaining a full, rounded dome during baking. Mastering this loaf is satisfying indeed. Serve slices topped with a layer of cottage cheese for breakfast.

Yield: 3 medium round loaves

Sponge

3 cups warm water (105 to 115°)
1 cup dried buttermilk
2 tablespoons (2 packages) active dry yeast
3/4 cup mild honey
3 cups whole-wheat flour

Dough

1/2 cup vegetable oil (not olive or peanut)
1-1/4 tablespoons salt
5 to 5-1/2 cups whole-wheat flour
Sponge, above

Rolled oats for sprinkling

1. To prepare the sponge: In a large bowl, whisk together the water, dried buttermilk, yeast, honey, and the 3 cups whole-wheat flour until smooth. Scrape down the sides with a spatula and cover with plastic wrap. Set in a warm place for about 1 hour. The sponge will double in bulk and be bubbly. Gently stir it down with a wooden spoon.

2. Sprinkle the oil, salt, and 2 cups of the flour over the sponge and beat hard with a whisk for 1 minute, or until smooth. Add the remaining flour 1/2 cup at a time with a wooden spoon until a soft dough is formed that just clears the sides of the bowl. This bread may also be made in the work bowl of a heavy-duty electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, if you prefer.
3. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface and knead until smooth and springy, yet slightly sticky, about 3 minutes, adding flour 1 tablespoon at a time as necessary to keep the dough from sticking to the work surface. Do not add too much flour, as the dough must retain a definite sticky quality, which will smooth out during the rising process. The dough will also have a slightly abrasive quality due to the whole grains. Place in a greased deep container, turn once to coat the top, and cover with plastic wrap. Let rise in a warm place until doubled in bulk, about 1-1/2 to 2 hours.
4. Turn the dough onto the work surface and divide it into 3 equal portions. Shape into 3 round balls and place at least 4 inches apart on a greased or parchment-lined baking sheet that has been sprinkled with rolled oats. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rise until not quite doubled in bulk, about 45 minutes. Twenty minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 375°.
5. Bake in the center of the preheated oven for about 40 to 45 minutes, or until the loaves are deep brown and hollow sounding when tapped. Place a piece of aluminum foil over the tops to control browning, if necessary. Cool on racks completely before slicing.

Whole wheat bread with apricots and seeds

In Step 2, replace 1/2 cup of whole-wheat flour in the recipe with 1/4 cup *each* of whole raw millet and oat bran, 3 tablespoons *each* wheat germ and raw sesame seeds; 1/2 cup raw sunflower seeds; and 1 cup finely chopped dried apricots. Proceed to mix, let rise, shape, and bake as for Old Fashioned 100 Percent Whole Wheat Bread.

Pumpkin Seed Wheat Bread

Add 1-3/4 cups toasted pumpkin seeds during the mixing in Step 2. Proceed to mix, let rise, shape, and bake as for Old Fashioned 100 Percent Whole-Wheat Bread.

To toast pumpkin seeds

On an ungreased baking sheet lined with parchment or aluminum foil, toss 1-3/4 cups unsalted raw pumpkin seeds with 3 tablespoons vegetable oil to evenly coat. Bake in the center of a preheated 300° oven until crisp and golden, about 20 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Let cool before using in bread recipes.