

A Flat Bread

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Flat breads are definitely in vogue, but they are in reality one of the first breads ever made at home, as well as one of the easiest. Coming from the Latin word "focus" which translates to fireplace, focaccia was baked directly on a hot hearthstone in a country fireplace. It was considered daily bread in the ancient world before the invention of the closed oven. Today it is also a favorite bakery item.

Known as the domestic cousin to pizza, focaccia is identical in proportions to pizza dough, just flour, salt, yeast, and liquid, right down to the addition of olive oil for flavor. Unbleached all-purpose flour is best, ringing in at 10 per cent gluten, so it stays soft enough to form and rise in the oven almost effortlessly. The difference between pizza and focaccia dough simply lies in the thickness and the simplicity of toppings. Instead of being baked immediately after shaping to form a thin crisp, focaccia dough is left to rise a second time before baking. Dipped in some extra-virgin olive oil, fresh focaccia is a great treat.

Focaccia is a favorite summer bread and once you make it you'll understand why. This is a bread for you to use your imagination. I consider a risen pan of focaccia dotted with olive popping out of the dough one of the prettiest sights in the bread world. Top with a simple combination of dried or fresh herbs marinated in good olive oil, add nuts to the dough or as a topping, make different shapes, even add sugar and top with sliced fruit for a sweet breakfast version. They are often topped with only olive oil and coarse salt. Toppings like mushrooms, cheeses, and onions are meant to be scattered lightly, mostly a flavor enhancer, never as generous as for a pizza topping. During the holidays, flat breads can also be enhanced with sugar, honey, spices, dried and fresh fruit. Two of the most famous sweet variations are Schiacciata con L'Uva, which is made during the Italian grape harvest with fresh grapes pressed into the dough, and La Pompe de Noël, the olive oil and orange flavored ladder bread that is one of the thirteen traditional desserts of Provence eaten at Christmas.

Beyond the Lingurian focaccia or focacce (the plural), these types of deliciously robust flat breads are known by many names in a variety of countries and regions of Europe: in Italian Umbria and Tuscany it is called *schacciata*, in Emilio-Romagna *piadina*, in Sicily, *sfincione*, and *pizza bianco* in Rome. In the Savoie region of France it is the *épogne* and in Provence, *fougasse*. It makes a simple, yet satisfying appetizer or sandwich bread when cut horizontally, or it can be cut into chunks to be served alongside roast meats and salads. It makes great toast the day after it is baked. Like biscuits and cornbreads, focaccia is best eaten the same day it is baked, with right out of the oven the best. It is a bread that guests never tire of, and is as good at room temperature as well as warmed.

About olive oil, the only oil that is extracted from a fruit. It is an important ingredient in flat breads. It is interesting to note that homebaked flat breads are baked in regions that traditionally use olive oil for cooking—the Middle East, Northern Africa, Spain, Greece, Provence, and parts of Italy. Home of the flat bread, Italian olive oils are the best in the world, with, I believe, California catching up quickly. Baking with olive oil is touted as good-for-you, since it dramatically cuts the saturated fat in a recipe. As an ingredient, it lets all of the other flavors come through while still giving a rich buttery texture. The general rule is to use the best quality you can afford and one suited to your palate, whether it be bold, subtle, fruity, nutty, or peppery; light-bodied or full-bodied; domestic or imported; or colored grassy green or golden, depending on whether it was pressed from unripe green or ripe black olives. For flat bread doughs and drizzling before baking, use a good-quality pure or virgin olive oil when called for in the ingredient list, since first press expensive extra-virgin oils are best used as a condiment for dipping and pouring over bread, where their unique character, flavor, and aroma can be best appreciated. Many bakers search out an olive oil from the region known for a particular flat bread for an authentic touch when making that flat bread.

Use a large baking sheet with a rim since the dough will rise to about 1 1/2 inches high. Sassafras, makers of La Cloche baking dish, has a 12-x-15-inch stone baking sheet pan with 1/2 inch sloping sides that works beautifully for firm doughs. I also like a round 14-inch diameter deep-dish pizza pan. If using a pizza power pan, the shallow metal pan with the swiss cheese-like holes, for the first time, season it by brushing with olive oil and baking in an empty 400° oven for 15 minutes. Remove, using insulated mitts, and cool before filling with dough. If you use a pan smaller than what is required, the focaccia will end up thicker.

Herb and Garlic Focaccia

Makes one rectangular or round flat bread serving about 10

I use fat free milk (used to be called nonfat milk) rather than water in my focaccia; it gives a really good flavor. Do not substitute whole milk, as it is meant to be watery with some milk solids. Certainly you can substitute any fresh or dried herbs for those suggested here used as a topping on a simple flat bread. This recipe is easily doubled.

Bakeware

One 11-x-17-x-1-inch rectangular baking sheet, 12-x-15-inch ceramic baking sheet pan, or 13-to 14-inch round pizza pan

Ingredients

2 teaspoons active dry yeast
Pinch sugar, honey, or barley malt
3 to 3 1/2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
1 1/4 cups warm fat free milk (105° to 115°)
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
1/3 cup good olive oil (can be extra-virgin)

Herb Topping

1/4 cup olive oil
3 cloves garlic, sliced very thin
1 tablespoon crumbled dried sage or 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh sage leaves, or to taste
1 tablespoon crumbled dried basil or 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh basil leaves, or to taste
Coarse kosher or seasalt, for sprinkling
Yellow cornmeal, for sprinkling the pan

Step 1: Mixing the Dough

In a small bowl, sprinkle the yeast, sugar, and 1 tablespoon of the flour over the milk. Stir until dissolved and let stand until foamy, about 15 minutes.

To make by hand: In a large bowl using a balloon or dough whisk, combine 1 cup of the flour and salt; make a well. Pour the yeast mixture and olive oil over and stir to combine. Beat vigorously for 2 minutes, adding the remaining flour 1/2 cup at a time, until a sticky dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. Using a plastic dough card, remove from the bowl.

To make by mixer: In the work bowl of a heavy-duty electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine 1 cup of the flour and salt; make a well. Pour the yeast mixture and olive oil over and stir on low to combine. On low speed, beat for 2 minutes. Add remaining flour, 1/2 cup at a time, until a soft, smooth dough that just clears the sides of the bowl is formed. Use the flour guard or stop the machine, then start again after adding the flour, to keep the it from jumping out of the bowl. Switch to the dough hook when the dough thickens, about two-thirds through adding the flour, and knead for about 3 minutes on medium speed. Using a plastic dough card, remove from the bowl.

In the DLX, combine 1 cup of the flour and salt. Pour in the yeast mixture and olive oil. Attach the roller and scraper attachments and lock the roller about 1-inch from the rim of the bowl. Start the machine and beat on low speed 1 minute. Add the rest of the flour gradually, increasing the machine speed from low to medium for the kneading. Set the timer on 2 minutes and knead on medium speed. The scraper will keep the sides of the bowl clean.

To make by processor: Place 3 cups of the flour and salt in the work bowl of a food processor fitted with a metal blade. Add the oil to the yeast mixture and, with the machine running, pour this mixture through the feed tube. Process until a ball is formed, about 30 seconds. Scrape the dough from the bowl.

Step 2: Kneading

Using a plastic dough card turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface. Knead until smooth and just able to hold its own shape, 4 to 6 kneads to just smooth out a machine-mixed dough and 2 minutes for a hand-mixed dough, dusting with flour only 1 tablespoon at a time, just enough as needed to prevent sticking to your hands and the work surface. The dough should stay very soft (as soft as possible; it doesn't need to hold its own shape), smooth, and very springy. Form into a flattened ball.

Step 3: Rising and Making the Topping

Place the dough ball in a greased deep container, turn once to coat the top, and cover with plastic wrap. If using a mixer, you can put on the cover to let it rise in the bowl. Let rise at room temperature until triple in bulk, about 1 1/2 hours. The dough may be refrigerated overnight at this point and left to stand at room temperature for 45 minutes before proceeding.

Meanwhile, warm the oil in a small skillet and add the garlic. Saute slowly for a few minutes until just soft, not browned. Combine the warm garlic oil and herbs in a small bowl. Let sit 30 minutes to come to room temperature. Prepare any other toppings at this time and set them aside at room temperature or in the refrigerator, as necessary.

Step 4: Shaping the Dough and Final Rise

Brush the baking sheets or pizza pan with plenty of oil and sprinkle with some cornmeal. Place the dough ball on a lightly floured work surface. Use the heel of your hand or a rolling pin to press and flatten the dough until it is very thin, approximately 1/4 to 3/8 inch thick. Lift and gently pull the dough, stretching it to fit into the pan. If the dough resists, let rest 5 minutes and continue. Cover gently with oiled plastic wrap and let rise at room temperature until double in bulk, 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Step 5: Topping, Baking, Cooling, and Storage

To simulate the intense, even heat of wood-burning brick ovens, place an unglazed baking stone or quarry tiles on the lowest rack of a cold oven at least 20 minutes before baking and preheat it to 450° for 20 minutes; otherwise preheat the oven to 400°.

Using your fingertips or knuckles, gently poke some indentations all over the dough surface about 1/4-inch deep and 2 inches apart with your fingertips. Drizzle the herb oil over the dough, letting it pool in the indentations. Sprinkle lightly with salt. Reduce the oven heat to 400° if using a stone.

Bake the pan directly on the hot stone or the oven rack for 25 to 35 minutes, or until nicely browned. Check the bottom halfway through the baking time by lifting a side with a metal

spatula to make sure the bottom is not too brown. If it is, slide another baking pan of the same size, known as double panning, underneath and continue baking. Let cool in the pan or slide from the pan onto a cutting board to cut into wedges with a pizza wheel or a serrated bread knife.

Best eaten the day it is baked or else freeze up to 1 month for longer storage. Defrost, wrapped, at room temperature and warm in the oven on a baking sheet before serving.

Baby Semolina Focaccia

Makes eight 6-inch pan or freeform rounds

These little focacce, called *focaccine*, are really fun to make since you get to scrounge around the pantry and make a mix-and-match patterning of toppings, sort of like the Chagall of bread dough. They are made with durum flour, also known as semolina pasta flour. The freeforms are great as appetizers with wine, while the pan focaccias are better served in wedges or split for sandwiches.

Bakeware

Two 11-x-17-x-1-inch-inch baking sheets or eight 6-inch round cake pans at least 1- inch deep

1 recipe Focaccia dough made with 1 1/2 cups durum flour substituted for 1 1/2 cups unbleached flour

1/2 cup olive oil, for brushing the dough

Choice of Toppings

Roasted red pepper strips

Chopped fresh or roasted garlic

Assorted olives, halved or chopped

Sliced fresh Roma tomatoes

Sautéed mushrooms

Grilled eggplant slices

Thin sliced zucchini

Defrosted frozen or canned marinated artichoke hearts
Oil-packed sundried tomatoes, drained and chopped or slivered
Prosciutto slivers
Black olive paste or basil pesto
Whole fresh basil, sage, or flat-leaf parsley leaves
Parmesan or a grated high-moisture melting cheese, like mozzarella or fontina
Yellow cornmeal or farina, for sprinkling the pan

Preheat the oven to 450° for 20 minutes with a stone; otherwise preheat the oven to 400°. Line the baking sheet with parchment, or brush the pans with oil, and sprinkle with cornmeal or farina.

Place the dough ball on a lightly floured work surface and divide into 8 equal portions. Use the heel of your hand, press and flatten the dough portions into a freeform round about 6 inches in diameter. Lift and gently pull the dough, stretching them to a round or oval shape on the baking sheet or press to fit into the pans. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rest at room temperature 20 minutes.

Press your fingertips over the surface of the dough to dimple and brush liberally with olive oil. Arrange or spread with the toppings, pressing in any whole ingredients. If using more than one ingredient, combine with attention to contrasting colors and shapes, and make sure the flavors are complementary.

Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until golden and the bottoms are browned. Serve immediately or cool on a rack and eat the same day.

Walnut Fougasse

Makes one rectangular or round flat bread serving 8

Fougasse is the French version of focaccia and it is often enriched with walnut oil and chopped fresh walnuts, which ends up one of the most famous flat breads simply known as *la fouace*, the hearthbread. Serve the wedges with unsalted butter for spreading.

Bakeware

One 11-x-17-x-1-inch rectangular baking sheet, 12-x-15-inch ceramic baking sheet pan, or 14-inch round deep pizza pan

1 recipe Focaccia dough with toasted walnut oil substituted for the olive oil and 1 cup (4 ounces) coarsely chopped walnuts added during the mixing of the dough

Line the baking sheet with parchment or brush the bottom and sides of the ceramic baking sheet or pizza pan with oil. Do not use cornmeal when preparing the pan. Place the dough ball on a lightly floured work surface. Using a rolling pin, like as for a pie dough, to an uneven 9-x-12-inch rectangle, or 14-inch round, about 1/2-inch thick, then transfer it to the prepared pan. After the final rise in the pan, with a sharp knife, cut 3 inch diagonal slashes right through to the bottom of the pan. Push the slashes open slightly with your fingers. Bake as for Focaccia.

Focaccia with Onions and Gorgonzola

Makes one rectangular flat bread serving about 10

This is one of the most dramatic and flavorful toppings, whether for a flat bread or pizza. It is also my favorite.

Bakeware

One 11-x-17-x-1-inch rectangular baking sheet, 12-x-15-inch ceramic baking sheet pan, or 14-inch round deep pizza pan

Onion Confit

4 medium yellow onions, peeled and thinly sliced

1/3 cup olive oil

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

Salt and pepper, to taste

3 tablespoons olive oil, for brushing

8 ounces Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled

Yellow cornmeal or farina, for sprinkling the pan

1 recipe Focaccia dough

Place the onions and olive oil in a large skillet. Cook over medium-high heat until wilted, then adjust the heat to low and cook, uncovered and stirring occasionally, until the onions are very soft and slightly caramelized, about 30 minutes. Add the vinegar, and taste for salt and pepper. Set aside to cool to room temperature.

Line the baking sheet with parchment, or brush the bottom and sides of the ceramic baking sheet or pizza pan with oil, and sprinkle with cornmeal or farina. Place the dough ball on a lightly floured work surface. Use the heel of your hand or a rolling pin to press and flatten the dough until it is very thin, approximately 1/4 to 3/8 inch thick. Lift and gently pull the dough, stretching it to fit into the pan. Brush with olive oil. Cover gently with oiled plastic wrap and let rise at room temperature until double in bulk, 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Preheat the oven to 400°, with a baking stone. Spread the onion confit over the surface and sprinkle with the cheese. Bake as for Focaccia. Serve at room temperature.

Whole Wheat or Spelt Focaccia with Tomatoes and Sage

Makes one rectangular flat bread serving about 10

For the purists who won't make any breads with white flours, here is a hearty, chewy version. Whether you use the whole wheat flour or the spelt flour, which grows in northern Italy and is known as *farro*, you will get two very different tasting flat breads. Spelt is often labeled as white or whole grain; either is fine. Be prepared for the dough to be a bit stickier.

Bakeware

One 11-x-17-x-1-inch-inch baking sheet or 12-x-15-inch ceramic baking sheet pan

1 recipe Focaccia dough made with fine whole wheat or spelt flour substituted for all of the unbleached flour with 10 fresh sage leaves, chopped, and added during the mixing of the dough

Topping

1/4 cup olive oil, for brushing the dough
6 Roma plum tomatoes, with the seeds squeezed out and sliced
10 fresh sage leaves
Coarse kosher or seasalt, for sprinkling

Place the dough ball on a lightly floured work surface and shape. Line the baking sheet with parchment or brush the bottom and sides of the ceramic baking sheet or pizza pan with oil. Do not use cornmeal when preparing the pan. Dimple the dough and brush with olive oil. Arrange the tomato slices on top and dot with the fresh sage leaves, pressing the stem ends into the dough. Sprinkle with salt and drizzle with any extra oil. Bake as for Focaccia.

Grilled Flatbread with Herbs and Cheese

Makes 8 round flatbreads

Baking bread outdoors over a charcoal or aromatic wood chip fire has become the rage of appetizers. The herbs must be fresh.

1 recipe Focaccia dough
3/4 cup chopped fresh basil, marjoram, sage, summer savory, rosemary, or flat-leaf parsley
1 cup olive oil
12 ounces Emmenthaler, Fontina, smoked mozzarella, or Asiago cheese, sliced
Extra-virgin olive oil, for dipping

Turn the risen dough out onto a lightly floured work surface and divide it into 8 equal portions. Roll the dough out to an 8-inch free-form round with a rolling pin. Sprinkle each with the herbs. Use a rolling pin to press the herbs into the dough surface. Drizzle each with 1 tablespoon olive oil and flip over onto a sheet of aluminum foil or parchment paper. Sprinkle again with herbs and oil. Repeat with the remaining rounds, stacking the flatbreads on their foil to store. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate for up to 2 hours if not grilling immediately.

Prepare an outdoor charcoal or wood chip fire in one-half of the grill. When the coals are covered with gray ash, throw a few branches of rosemary, thyme, or lavender on top of the coals for extra aromatics while grilling. For a gas grill with two burners, preheat one burner on high, leaving the other off; for a single burner, preheat on high then lower the flame while baking the second side. Place a clean grill sprayed with olive oil cooking spray 4 inches above the fire and flip the flatbread onto the hot side of the grill. Remove the foil or parchment immediately. Grill as many breads as will fit at once, usually 2 to 3.

Cook 1 to 2 minutes, until firm and puffed, then turn once with metal tongs to grill the other side, moving it to the area of the grill with indirect heat, for a total of 7 to 8 minutes. Drizzle with more olive oil and top with a layer of cheese. Remove from the grill with a large metal spatula or insulated mitts to a cutting board; cut into quarters. Serve warm in a basket with extra olive oil, if desired.

Cheese-Stuffed Focaccia

Makes one round flat bread serving 6 to 8

This is one of the unique ways to shape focaccia; rolling out the dough and filling it like a tart. It is filled with some mild semi-soft village-style cheese, one that is firm enough to slice or grate, yet melts into a buttery soft mass. If I have extra St. Andre, a bit of Brie, soft goat, or Gorgonzola from a party, I will dot some of it on top of the cheese in place of the Parmesan. Serve with frosty bottles of cold beer or a nice Chianti.

Bakeware

One 11-x-17-inch rectangular baking sheet or 12-inch round pizza pan

Cheese Filling

12 ounces Italian Taleggio, Bel Paese, Teleme, or Monterey Jack cheese

1/3 cup finely grated Parmesan cheese

3 tablespoons olive oil, for brushing

1 recipe Focaccia dough

Line the baking sheet with parchment or brush the pan with oil. Do not use cornmeal when preparing the pan. Slice or coarsely grate the cheese. Place the dough ball on a lightly floured work surface and divide into 2 equal portions. Using a rolling pin, roll out one portion, like as for a pie dough, to a 10- to 11-inch round about 1/8-inch thick, then transfer it onto the prepared pan. Take care not to tear the dough or else the cheese will leak out during baking. On the pizza pan, it will be a bit smaller in diameter; on the baking sheet, it will be freeform.

Spread with the grated or sliced cheese and sprinkle with the Parmesan, leaving a 1 1/2-inch border. Brush the edges of the dough with water. Roll out the remaining portion of dough on a lightly floured surface. Fold in half and cut a small hole in the center of the folded edge to make a hole for steam to escape. Place on top of the filling. Press the edges together and crimp to seal. Brush the top with olive oil and cover with a clean, damp tea towel. Preheat the oven to 450° for 10 minutes, with the baking stone on the lower third rack.

Bake for 10 to 15 minutes, until golden brown on top, yet a bit soft. Serve immediately, cut into wedges, while hot.