

A White Bread

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Indulge in the simplicity. It is a mystery to me how the wonderful loaf of homemade white bread got such a bad reputation. Most commercial loaves ended up being a spongy textured bread with no flavor and this is what many people have come to think of when they are offered white bread. This bread has unfortunately given white bread a bad name and reputation it does not deserve. This is the loaf that made toast famous. Plain white bread is new territory for the beginner to explore and the experienced bakers domain: beautiful, rich white bread with a faint trace of sweetness and moist, even texture. Homemade white bread is delicious and nutritious as well. Since most flours are enriched with vitamins and minerals, a surprising fact is that your white breads are almost as nutritious as whole wheat breads, just minus the fiber.

Breads made with the finest white wheat flour have historically been the most coveted of foods. They are still one of the most popular breads made, either at home or commercially. Until the high powered grain mills of the nineteenth century were able to separate the bran from the ground starchy endosperm, refined white wheat flour was expensive and scarce; dark breads made from coarsely ground whole grains were the norm. Modern bakers are able to choose from a large selection of finely ground white wheat flours, both all-purpose and bread flours, from which to make homemade loaves of a premium quality and flavor.

Today's superior white flours ground from American and Canada's abundant grain fields yield a beautiful and nutritious loaf with a characteristic soft crust. Many white pan bread formulas incorporate milk, buttermilk, eggs, sugar, and some fat, to make a luscious, memorable tasting loaf. Since the flour is the predominant ingredient, it's quality will dramatically affect how your loaf will look and taste. Consider buying a stoneground white flour next time you visit a small mill; the flavor and texture will have you craving more.

Plain white bread is the basis for adding other ingredients that will accent its basic flavor: maple syrup, honey, or sugar; grated citrus zests, herbs, or spices; seeds and nuts; cheese and eggs. They can be glazed or drizzled with a powdered sugar icing, or shaped into twists and braids. The loaves can be made in a variety of sizes from sandwich size loaves to individual mini-loaves, which are always delightful since each diner can cut into his own loaf.

One recipe made with about 6 cups of flour, baked at 375°, will make:

- Two 9-x-5-x-3-inch loaves with a baking time of 40 to 45 minutes
- Three 8-x-4 1/2-x-2 1/2-inch loaves with a baking time of 35 to 40 minutes
- Four 7 1/2-x-4-x-2-inch loaves with a baking time of 30 to 35 minutes
- Eight 6-x-3-x-2-inch loaves (two straps of 4 pans each) with a baking time of 25 to 30 minutes
- Sixteen 4-x-2 1/2-x-2-inch individual loaves with a baking time of 18 to 24 minutes

Milk Bread

Makes 2 loaves

This is the recipe for the first loaf of bread I ever made in a class over twenty years ago. And a gem it still is. The teacher, Connie Pfeiffer, learned how to make bread from her father, a chef on Danish luxury liners. In a large room at the community recreation center, we sat at long tables, each with our large Tupperware bowl, dish towels, whisk, wooden spoon, and measuring cups. We beat the ingredients and kneaded together in a large group, guided gently by Connie, then took the dough home to rise in the mixing bowl and bake later. The recipe is so good that no one ever failed. Make this delicious white bread many times, making it your own.

Bakeware

Two 9-x-5-inch loaf pans (can be metal, nonstick aluminum, glass, or clay)

Ingredients

6 to 6 1/2 cups unbleached all-purpose or bread flour
2 tablespoons sugar

- 1 scant tablespoon (1 package) active dry yeast
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 cups warm milk (about 100°)
- 1/4 cup boiling water
- 3 tablespoons canola, light olive, or vegetable oil
- 1 egg mixed with 1 tablespoon milk, for glaze

Step 1: Mixing the Dough

Assemble the ingredients and equipment around your work surface. Set your mixing bowl, whisk, wooden spoon, measuring cups and spoons, and dough scrapers, or heavy-duty electric mixer, if using, on center of the work surface. Place the flour at the side of the work surface for easy access during the kneading.

To make by hand: In a large bowl using a balloon or dough whisk, , combine 2 cups of flour, the sugar, yeast, and salt. In a small bowl or two-cup liquid measuring cup, combine the milk, boiling water, and oil. If using a thermometer, it will read between 110° and 125°. It should feel hot to the touch. Make a well in the center of the dry ingredients and pour in. Beat about 3 minutes, scraping the bowl occasionally. Add 1/2 cup of flour and beat vigorously 3 minutes longer. Switch to a wooden spoon when the dough clogs the whisk. Add remaining flour, 1/2 cup at a time, beating another 3 minutes total to make a stiff, shaggy dough that just clears the sides of the bowl.

To make by mixer: In the work bowl of a heavy-duty Kitchen Aid electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine 2 cups of flour, the sugar, yeast, and salt. In a small bowl or two-cup liquid measuring cup, combine the milk, boiling water, and oil. If using a thermometer, it will read between 110° and 125°. It should feel hot to the touch. On low speed, pour in the liquid ingredients. Increase the speed to medium-low and beat about 2 minutes. Add 1/2 cup of flour and beat vigorously 2 minutes longer. On low speed, add the remaining flour, 1/2 cup at a time, until a soft dough clears the sides of the bowl is formed, a total of another 2 minutes. Use the flour guard or drape a tea towel over the top to keep the flour 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 2 minutes on medium speed until the dough works its way up the hook. The dough will make a soft ball, pull away from the sides of the bowl, and roll around.

In the work bowl of a heavy-duty DLX electric mixer, combine 2 cups of flour, the sugar, yeast, and salt. Attach the roller and scraper attachments and lock the roller about 1-inch from the rim of the bowl. In a small bowl or two-cup liquid measuring cup, combine the milk, boiling water, and oil. If using a thermometer, it will read between 110° and 125°. It should feel hot to the touch. On low speed, pour in the liquid ingredients. Add the rest of the flour gradually, increasing the machine speed from low to medium for the kneading. Set the timer on 4 minutes and knead on medium to medium-high speed. The scraper will keep the sides of the bowl clean.

Step 2: Kneading

Using a plastic dough card, turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface. Knead until firm yet smooth and satiny, under 1 minute for a machine-mixed dough (6 to 10 kneads to smooth it out) and 5 to 8 minutes for a hand-mixed dough, dusting with flour only 1 tablespoon at a time, as needed to prevent sticking to your hands and the work surface.

Step 3: Rising

Place the dough ball in a greased deep container, turn once to grease 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 double in bulk, 1 1/2 to 2 hours. Do not allow the dough to rise over double. The age-old test is to press a fingertip into the top of the dough to see if the indentation remains. If it needs to rise more, the indentation will fill back in quickly. Do not worry or rush the dough if it takes longer.

Step 4: Shaping the Dough and Final Rise

Lightly grease the bottom and sides of two 9-by-5-inch loaf pans. Turn the dough out onto a clean work surface; it will naturally deflate. Without working the dough further, use your metal bench scraper or chef knife to divide the dough into into 4 equal portions. The scraper requires a swift downward motion to cut, while the knife uses a gentle sawing motion to avoid tearing. With the palms of your hands, roll into 4 fat oblong sausages, each about 10 inches long. Place 2 of the pieces side by side. Holding both pieces of dough together at one end, wrap one around the other 2 to 3 times to create a fat twist effect. Repeat to form the second loaf. Place in the pans and tuck under the ends. Brush the tops with the some melted

butter or oil. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rise at room temperature until the dough is almost double in bulk, about 1 inch over the rims of the pans, about 1 hour.

Step 5: Baking, Cooling, and Storage

Twenty minutes before baking, set the oven rack to the middle and preheat the oven to 375° (lower the temperature by 25° if using glass).

Using a pastry brush, brush the tops of the loaves with the egg glaze. Do not let the egg glaze drip down into the sides of the pan or the bread will stick. Bake 40 to 45 minutes, or until the loaves are deep golden brown, the sides are slightly contracted from the pan, and sound hollow when tapped on the bottoms with your finger. Lift one end of the loaf up out of the pan to peek underneath to check for an even browning on the bottom, and tap on the top and bottom surface with your finger; it should sound hollow. An instant-read thermometer will read 200°. Immediately remove the loaves from the pans by holding the pan on each end with a thick dish towel or insulated oven mitt, and shaking gently to slide the loaf out, to set on its side, on a wire or wood cooling rack. For proper cooling, air must circulate all around the loaf, so leave plenty of room between the loaves and at least 1 inch of space under the rack to keep the crust from getting soggy. Be sure to let the loaves rest for at least 15 minutes before slicing (it can be difficult, but this wait is worth it so the center will not be doughy), to allow excess moisture to evaporate and finish the baking process. Loaves are best sliced slightly warm or at room temperature.

Milk Bread stays moist about 3 days. Store the unsliced bread wrapped in a plastic food storage bag at room temperature or in the freezer up to 2 months.

Cornmeal Honey Bread

Substitute 1 cup of medium yellow cornmeal for an equal amount of white flour. Substitute honey for the sugar.

Caraway Light Rye Bread

Substitute 1 1/2 cups of medium rye flour for an equal amount of white flour. Substitute molasses for the sugar and add 1 tablespoon caraway seeds to the dough during the mixing after adding the salt.

Granola Bread

Substitute 1 1/2 cups of granola cereal for an equal amount of white flour. Substitute light brown sugar for the sugar.

My Raisin Bread

Makes 2 loaves

I like my raisin bread to be really full of raisins in every bite, so you will notice the large amount called for in this recipe. The raisins are added after the rising in a wonderful technique where you sprinkle them over the dough, then gently knead to distribute and form the loaf shape. You will use this technique often for adding any type of dried fruit or nuts. Initially, the dough gets to rise without the heavy ingredients. Top the loaves with either sesame seeds, which is a surprisingly toothsome combination, or coarse granulated sugar.

Bakeware

Two 9-x-5-inch loaf pans

1 recipe Milk Bread dough

1 1/2 cups golden raisins

1 1/2 cups dark raisins

1 egg mixed with 1 tablespoon milk, for glaze

3 tablespoons sesame seeds or raw sugar, for sprinkling

Lightly grease the bottom and sides of two 9-by-5-inch loaf pans. Turn the risen dough out onto the work surface and divide in half. Pat each portion into a 9-by-12-inch rectangle and

sprinkle 3/4 cup each of the golden and dark raisins. Press in gently, then knead to evenly distribute. Starting at the long edge, roll up jelly-roll fashion into a tight log. Pinch the ends and the long seam to seal. While placing the loaf into the pans, tuck the ends under to make a neat, snug fit. The log should be of an even thickness and fill the pans about two-thirds full. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rise at room temperature until the dough is fully double in bulk and about 1 inch over the rims of the pans, about 45 minutes.

Twenty minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 375° (lower the temperature by 25° if using glass pans). Brush the loaves with the egg glaze and sprinkle with sesame seeds or sugar, as desired. Bake 40 to 45 minutes, until browned and the bottom sounds hollow when tapped with your finger. Transfer to a rack to cool completely.

Cheese Mini-Loaves

Makes 16 mini-loaves

These loaves, delightfully streaked with cheese, can be served like a dinner roll.

Bakeware

Sixteen 4-x-2 1/2-x-2-inch individual loaf pans

1 recipe Milk Bread dough with 2 cups grated mild or sharp Cheddar cheese added to the dough during the mixing after the second addition of flour.

1 egg mixed with 1 tablespoon milk, for glaze

Lightly grease the bottom and sides of sixteen 4-x-2 1/2-x-2-inch individual loaf pans. After rising, turn the dough out onto the work surface and divide in half. Divide each half further into 8 equal portions. Pat each portion into a standard loaf shape and place in the loaf pans. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rise for 15 minutes, until almost double in bulk.

Twenty minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 375°. Brush the loaves with the egg glaze. Bake 18 to 24 minutes, until browned and the bottom sounds hollow when tapped with your finger. Transfer to a rack to cool completely.

Winter Herb Bread

Makes 2 loaves

The herbs in this bread are a dramatic flavor statement and the bread is heavily flecked. A sandwich bread at its best.

- 1 recipe Milk Bread
- 3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon crumbled dried basil leaves
- 1 1/2 teaspoons dried dill weed
- 1 1/2 teaspoons crumbled dried summer savory
- 1 1/2 teaspoons crumbled dried oregano or marjoram
- 1 teaspoon crushed dried tarragon leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon crumbled dried thyme

Add the herbs to the dough during the mixing after adding the eggs. Proceed to rise, shape, glaze, and bake as directed.