

Pita Bread

1 1/2 cups warm water (105° to 115°)
1 tablespoon (1 package) active dry yeast
Pinch of sugar
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 1/2 teaspoon salt
3 1/2 to 4 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

In a small bowl or one-cup liquid measuring cup, pour in 1/2 cup of the warm water. Sprinkle the yeast and the pinch of sugar over the surface of the water. Stir to dissolve and let stand at room temperature until foamy, about 10 minutes.

In the large bowl using a whisk or in the workbowl of a heavy-duty electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine the remaining water, olive oil, salt, and 1 cup of flour. Beat hard until creamy, about 1 minute. Stir in the yeast mixture. Add the remaining flour, 1/2 cup at a time, until a soft, shaggy dough is formed that just clears the sides of the bowl, switching to a wooden spoon when necessary if making by hand. Switch to a wooden spoon when necessary if making by hand or, if using the electric mixer, insert the dough hook attachment. The dough will be slightly stiff, sticky, and just clear the sides of the bowl.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface with the plastic dough scraper. Use the plastic scraper to begin the first kneads, if kneading by hand, dusting with flour only 1 tablespoon at a time, just enough as needed to prevent sticking. Knead 4 to 5 minutes. If kneading in the electric mixer, knead 4 minutes by a timer on medium speed. Leave the dough moist and soft, yet at the same time smooth and springy.

Place the dough in a deep plastic container brushed with olive oil. Turn the dough once to coat the top and cover with plastic wrap. Let rise at room temperature until double in bulk, about 1 to 1 1/2 hours.

Preheat the oven to 450°, with a baking stone set on the bottom rack, if desired. Brush several baking sheets lightly with oil.

Gently deflate the dough and divide it in half. Cover 1 half with plastic wrap or a clean towel to prevent forming a skin. Divide into 5 equal portions and form each into a ball. Let rest 10

minutes while dividing the second section of dough. Using a rolling pin on the work surface dusted with some flour, roll the balls into 6-inch circles about 1/4-inch thick. Loosely cover the circles on the bench with a clean towel. Do not stack; they will stick together. If the dough does not roll out easily, let it rest, covered on the work surface, for 10 minutes. Move the finished dough circles by draping them one at a time over a flour-dusted rolling pin to place them on a floured kitchen towel to rest. Let rest 15 minutes, until puffy.

Place a baking sheet in the oven to preheat for 6 minutes.

With heavy oven mitts, remove the baking sheet from the oven and place on a wire rack or on the top of the stove. Transfer the circles to the hot baking sheet; four will fit on one large baking sheet. Return to the oven, placing the baking sheet directly on the baking stone. Do not open the oven door for a full 3 minutes or else the breads will not puff correctly. Watch carefully that the pitas do not overbake or burn. Bake 6 to 7 minutes, until puffed and light brown. Remove the hot breads from the baking sheet with a wide metal spatula and stack between clean kitchen towels to keep warm.

Pitas should be eaten as soon as they are cool or wrapped in a clean kitchen towel to keep warm until serving. Store in plastic bags in the refrigerator for 1 day or else freeze.

Makes 10 sandwich-size pita breads

Sesame Pita Bread

Sprinkle sesame seeds on the work surface and roll the dough ball out on them, coating both surfaces.

Family-Size Pita Bread

Divide the dough into 4 equal portions instead of 8. Proceed to roll out, rise, and bake as directed, baking 1 large pita on a baking sheet at a time.