

Minnesota Swedish Rye Bread

Sponge

2 tablespoons (2 1/2 packages) active dry yeast or 4 1/2 teaspoons SAF instant yeast
4 cups tepid water (about 100°)
3 cups medium rye flour
1/2 cup unsulphured light molasses
1/3 cup packed dark brown sugar
1 tablespoon fennel seed, crushed in a mortar and pestle

Dough

3 tablespoons vegetable oil
4 teaspoons salt
7 to 8 cups bread flour
Rye flour or brown rice flour, for dusting

Make the sponge: In a large bowl or bowl of a heavy-duty electric mixer, sprinkle the yeast over the warm water. Stir with a balloon whisk or whisk attachment to dissolve. Add the rye flour, molasses, brown sugar, and fennel seed; beat with a whisk until smooth. The starter will be batter-like. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature 1 hour. It will be bubbly and pleasantly fermented.

Make the dough: Add the oil, salt, and 2 cups of the bread flour to the sponge. Beat hard with a wooden spoon for 2 minutes, or for 1 minute in the mixer fitted with the paddle attachment on medium speed. Add the remaining bread flour, 1/2 cup at a time. 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.

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 6 minutes. If kneading in the electric mixer, knead 5 minutes by a timer on medium speed. The dough should retain a smooth, soft quality, with some tackiness under the surface, yet still hold its own shape. Do not add too much flour, as the dough will be too dry and hard to work. The

dough will be smooth and springy; do not add too much flour or the dough will stiffen up. This is important for a good, light texture.

Transfer the dough into a greased deep container brushed with oil. Turn the dough once to coat the top. Loosely cover with a piece of plastic wrap or a damp clean tea towel. Let rise at room temperature until doubled in bulk, 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

Lightly grease the bottom and sides of four 8 1/2-by-4 1/2-inch loaf pans with oil or nonstick vegetable cooking spray.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface; it will naturally deflate. Divide the dough into 4 equal portions. Knead lightly a few times and shape into rectangular loaves. Dust lightly all over with a bit of rye or brown rice flour and place, seam side down, in the pans. Let rise, covered with a clean dish towel, at room temperature until soft, springy and one inch above the rim of the pans, about 1 hour.

Twenty minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 350° (325° if using dark finish or glass loaf pans).

Using a small, sharp knife, slash 3 diagonal strokes, no deeper than 1/4 inch, across the top of each loaf. Bake until golden brown and crusty, 50 to 55 minutes. Immediately remove from the pans to cool on a rack.

Makes four 8 1/2-by-4 1/2-inch loaves