

Three great bread recipes

By Richard Blunt

Homemade bread is one of my favorite foods. I've been making it the old fashioned way (by hand) for ten years. There are machines that will mix it, knead it, bake it, and probably eat it for you. But feeling the dough at each stage of development is part of the unique pleasure I experience when I make my own bread.

If you're fortunate enough to have developed an appreciation for good home cooked food, but you're still buying your bread at the grocery store, you're denying yourself one of the most rewarding experiences home cooking can offer.

The aroma of bread baking in your oven, followed by the delight of sitting down to a slice of fresh homemade bread and a good cup of coffee, a glass of milk, or your favorite beer, ale or wine is hard to beat.

We take bread for granted. We go to the grocery store and buy those tasteless, spongy loaves and somehow convince ourselves that this is as good as it gets. Or maybe we think it's the best we can afford or all we deserve. The truth is, good commercial bread is hard to find. Like many other foods, if you want it good, you have to make it yourself.

However, good bread is not only easy to make, it's fun.

In this month's column, I'm going to give you three good recipes. But first I'm going to give you a little technical information so you'll know what part each ingredient plays in the making of the bread as well as what's happening at each step along the way. With this, you'll be on your way to making the best bread you've ever tasted. If you're a newcomer to bread baking, these recipes will give you a great opportunity to make an excellent loaf on your first try. But, even if you are an old kitchen hand, give these recipes a try. I think you're going to like them.

The equipment

First, let's examine some of the equipment you're going to need. Although bread can be baked in two ways—free form and in loaf pans—we're going to use pans. There are several different sizes and each has a specific use. The most common, and the one we'll be working with here, is 9"x5"x3". This size pan will hold from 22 to 26 ounces of dough.

If you've read my earlier columns, you know I make big use of a food thermometer. When baking bread, the temperature of the liquids to be combined with the yeast must be measured. You'll want a good food thermometer for this.

Liquid that's too hot will kill the yeast, but if it's too cold, it will slow the yeast down and the bread won't rise properly.

A good bread knife is as important as a good bread pan or thermometer. The wrong knife will tear fresh bread apart instead of slicing it. Take my advice; buy a good bread knife with a serrated blade. You won't regret it.

No matter how new or expensive your oven is, it's quite possible that the temperature settings on it are not accurate. When baking bread it is important that the oven temperature be accurate. To check this, buy an oven thermometer. They're not expensive. Set your oven to a medium temperature, like 300 degrees, and heat it with the thermometer in the middle of the oven. Check the thermometer in about fifteen minutes. If the set temperature does not agree with the thermometer, either use the thermometer to determine oven temperatures or call a repairman and have your oven calibrated.

Bread is best when baked in an oven that produces a steady and evenly diffused heat. Most gas or electric ovens produce radiated heat which can produce hot and cool spots. You can compensate for this by turning your loaves around once or twice during baking. But there are two more reliable solutions. One is to buy a baking stone and place it on the lowest rack in the oven. Better yet, buy a half dozen 5 1/2" square unglazed quarry tiles from your local building supply store. Place these on the lowest rack in your oven. They are less expensive than a baking stone and work just as well. I have been using my quarry tiles for ten years with excellent results.

During the rising process the dough must be covered. A good cloth dish towel will do the job.

Finally, when mixing bread dough by hand, a good sturdy wooden spoon is worth having. Bread dough can get quite stiff before all the required flour is added and the spoon will make mixing easier.

The ingredients

Now, let's briefly examine the ingredients you need to make bread dough and what part each plays.

First there's the flour. Flour is the backbone of any bread. There are several flours available for bread—white, whole wheat, barley, corn, oat, and rye flour to name a few. But we will use only the white and whole wheat here. Hard wheat bread flour and all purpose flour are the most common white flours used in bread. The hard wheat flour is used by professional bakers but is available at the supermarket. It

has a high percentage of protein and gluten, which makes it a first choice for bread.

When the flour is mixed with water this protein is activated and makes the dough strong and elastic. A strong elastic dough will hold the gas generated by the yeast so the bread will rise. All purpose flour does not have as much gluten as bread flour and will not rise as reliably.

There are several types of whole wheat flour. There are stone ground and pumpnickel, which are coarse grinds, and graham which is finely ground. All whole wheat flour is made by grinding the whole kernel including the bran and the germ. (The germ is the sprouting section of the kernel and contains fat.)

There are several leavening agents used in baking. Yeast is one of the most important. Yeast cells feed on sugar in the bread mixture to produce carbon dioxide which is the reason the dough rises. You can find three varieties of yeast in the store—dry granulated, fresh cake, and fast acting dry granulated. I'm going to recommend the use of dry granulated for these recipes because it is easy to use and stores well. "Proof" your yeast before you use it. Proofing is done by mixing the yeast with some sugar and a little water that has been heated to between 110 and 115 degrees. Proofing lets you know if the yeast is active. In about 5 minutes a layer of foam should appear on top of the mixture. If you don't get the foam, the yeast is not active and you must start again with fresh yeast.

Sugar, in the form of refined white sugar, honey, or molasses impart sweetness as well as flavor to bread. It also helps the crust to brown. Because it feeds the activity of the yeast, sugar in some form is included in most bread recipes.

Salt accents the flavor of other ingredients and helps to control yeast activity. A lot of people, in baking bread, under salt. This doesn't do the bread any good but if you feel compelled to do so for health reasons, go ahead.

Fat contributes tenderness to the loaf and lubricates the gluten, helping the dough to rise. Butter, margarine and lard contribute unique flavors to bread. My preference is margarine because it is low in cholesterol. However, salad or vegetable oil can be substituted in any recipe calling for melted butter, margarine, or lard.

Many liquids are used in bread making, but milk is by far the most popular. Milk contributes a velvety grain and browner crust to your bread. It also adds vital nutrients and additional flavor. I use non-fat dry milk because it has the qualities mentioned above without adding fat to the loaf.

Measuring the flour, mixing the flour with the other ingredients, kneading the dough and rising (proofing) the dough are the four procedures that determine the success of your bread.

Flour does not need sifting when used for bread. When measuring flour for bread dough, use the "scoop and level" method. Scoop the flour from it's container with the correct size measuring cup, then level the flour to the top of the cup

with the straight side of a knife or spatula. This is how all of the flour was measured for the recipes in this column. Don't tamp the flour down.

Because flour is not consistent with moisture content, even with the same brand name, the recipe that takes six cups this week may only require five cups next week.

For this reason I have given only approximate measurements for bread flour in the recipes. Also, the assembly instructions call for only a portion of the bread flour to be added when first mixing it with other ingredients. The remainder can be added a little at a time during kneading. When you have added enough you'll know by the feel of the dough.

Kneading

Kneading is where you get the first indication of what sort of adjustments will benefit the outcome of the recipe. If the dough feels too dry, it can be returned to the bowl and a little more liquid added. The dough should be a little sticky when you first start kneading. This allows you to add flour a little at a time until the dough feels just right. Sufficient kneading is necessary to get proper rising of the dough. Kneading consists of three routine steps and one occasional "fun" step. The routine steps are push, turn and fold. The occasional fun step is called, "slam". After sufficient mixing of the dough, sprinkle a little flour on the work surface and remove the dough from the bowl to this area. Form the dough into a ball, adding more flour to the work surface to prevent sticking. Push down on the ball with the heels of your hands. Pull back on the dough, give it a quarter turn and fold it. Now repeat this for ten to fifteen minutes - push, turn and fold. Every few minutes, pick up the dough and "slam" it down on the counter. The dough loves this treatment and will reward you with excellent bread. Kneading is complete when the dough no longer feels sticky and has developed an elastic texture.

To determine if kneading is complete, make an indent in the dough with your finger. If the indent springs back, you're done.

Proofing is when the yeast cells take over. This is a quiet period when the yeast does its act and the dough rises. Proofing should be done in a well oiled straight sided bowl, large enough to allow the dough to double in bulk, without coming over the top. The dough has risen enough when it has doubled its bulk. Test this by making another indent in the dough. If the indent remains, the dough has risen enough.

Well, let's get to the recipes. The first one is for the all time favorite "white bread." After seeing my first successful loaves of white bread come out of the oven, I became

hooked on home made bread. I make four to six loaves a week to keep my kids from running away.

Classic White Bread

1 pkg (¼ oz.) dry granulated yeast
1½ Tbsp. white sugar
2 cups warm water (110 to 115° F)
4 Tbsp. melted butter or margarine
5 to 6 cups bread flour
1/3 cup non-fat dry milk
2 tsp. salt

Preparation

- 1) Mix the yeast and sugar with 1 cup of warm water and set aside to proof.
- 2) Melt the butter or margarine and allow it to cool.
- 3) Combine 4 cups of bread flour with the non-fat dry milk and salt. Blend this mixture.
- 4) Combine the proofed yeast with the remaining cup of warm water and the melted margarine or butter. Do this in a bowl large enough to mix in the flour.
- 5) With a wooden spoon, stir the flour mixture into the yeast one cup at a time until all 4 cups are mixed in. Continue adding the remaining 2 cups of flour until the dough becomes firm. The flour not used at this time will be used during the kneading process.
- 6) Sprinkle some of the remaining flour onto your work surface and remove the dough to this surface.
- 7) Start kneading as I explained earlier. Continue to add flour to the work surface to prevent sticking. Knead until the dough is not sticky and has developed a smooth and elastic texture.
- 8) Transfer the dough to a well oiled bowl, cover it and allow it to rise until it's doubled in bulk. Depending on the temperature, this will take from one to two hours.
- 9) When the first rising is complete, punch the dough down to remove the air. Transfer the dough to a lightly floured work area and knead for five minutes.
- 10) Divide the dough into two equal size balls and allow them to rest for five minutes. Shape these balls into loaves and place them into two well oiled 9"x5"x3" loaf pans. Cover these and allow them to rise until they double in bulk.
- 11) Bake in a 375 degree oven for 40 to 45 minutes or until each loaf sounds hollow when tapped with your knuckles. If you desire more color and crispness in the crust, remove the loaves from the pans and place them back into the oven until you have the color and crispness you want. Caution! This should only take about 3 to 5 minutes. Bread put back this way is just like a big piece of toast.
- 12) When the loaves are done and removed from the pans, set them onto wire racks to cool. Do not cut the loaves while they are hot.

This next recipe is for the Whole Wheat bread that has become a standard in my house. Give it a try. I think it may become a standard for you also.

Whole Wheat Bread

2 pkg (¼ oz. each) dry granulated yeast
2 tsp. sugar
2 cups warm water (110-115° F)
3 Tbsp. melted butter or margarine
2½ cups whole wheat flour
2½ to 3 cups bread flour
2 tsp. salt
½ cup non-fat dry milk
1 Tbsp. honey
1 Tbsp. molasses

Preparation

- 1) Combine the yeast, sugar and warm water. Set aside to proof.
- 2) Melt the butter or margarine and mix with the honey and molasses.
- 3) Combine the whole wheat flour with 1 1/2 cups of bread flour, salt, and non-fat dry milk.
- 4) Combine the proofed yeast mixture with the melted butter or margarine mixture in a bowl large enough to mix in the flour.
- 5) With a wooden spoon, stir the flour mixture into the yeast, one cup at a time, until it is completely mixed in. Continue adding the remaining 1 cup of bread flour until the dough becomes firm. Use what is left during the kneading.
- 6) Remove the dough to a floured work space and knead as I described earlier.
- 7) After kneading, transfer the dough to a well oiled bowl, cover it and allow it to rise until it doubles in bulk.
- 8) When completely risen, punch the dough down and knead for 5 more minutes. Then cut the dough into two equal size balls and allow it to rest another five minutes.
- 9) Shape the balls into loaves and place them into two 9"x5"x3" loaf pans. Cover and allow to rise again until they double in bulk.
- 10) Bake in a 375 degree oven for 40 to 45 minutes or until each loaf sounds hollow when tapped with your knuckles. Remove the loaves from the pan and place them back into the oven for a couple of minutes. This will add color and crispness.
- 11) Set the bread aside on wire racks to cool.

The following recipe is a mixed grain bread that has an interesting texture and a wonderful taste. It is one of the breads I eat without anything on it.

Mixed Grain Bread

1½ cups regular oatmeal (uncooked)
1/3 cup Wheatena (uncooked)
2 tsp. salt
2½ cups boiling water
2 Tbsp. melted margarine or butter
½ cup molasses
¼ cup honey
2 pkg (¼ oz. each) dry granulated yeast
½ tsp granulated sugar
1 cup warm water
4 cups bread flour
2½ cups whole wheat flour
1/3 cup non-fat dry milk

Preparation

1) Combine oats, Wheatena, and salt in a bowl then mix in the boiling water. Set this mixture aside to thicken for about ten minutes. When the cereal has absorbed the water and become thick, add the butter or margarine, molasses and honey. Set this aside to cool to about 115 degrees F.

2) When the cereal mixture has cooled, combine the granulated yeast, sugar and warm water. Mix and set aside to proof.

3) In a separate bowl, combine 3 cups of the bread flour with the 2 1/2 cups of whole wheat flour and non-fat dry milk.

4) After the yeast has proofed, combine it with the cooled cereal in a bowl large enough to mix in the flour.

5) Mix the blended flour into the yeast cereal mixture, one cup at a time, until completely incorporated. Continue to add part of the remaining 1 cup of bread flour, a little at a time, until the dough becomes firm. Use the remaining flour during kneading.

6) Knead the dough until it's smooth and elastic and not sticky.

7) Transfer the dough to a well oiled bowl, cover and allow it to rise until it doubles in bulk. When the first rising is complete, punch down the dough, remove it from the bowl and knead it for another five minutes.

8) Divide the dough into two equal size balls and allow them to rest for 5 minutes.

9) Shape the dough into two loaves and place each into well oiled 9"x5"x3" loaf pans. Cover the pans with a clean cloth and allow them to rise until they double in bulk.

10) Bake them in a 350 degree oven for about 1 hour or until the bread sounds hollow when tapped with your knuckles.

Well, that's it for this time around. I'll see you in next issue's column when I introduce you to some of the secrets of real Oriental cooking that you can incorporate into you own daily cooking with great results. Δ