

A simple handmade loaf

Contributed by Trigfa

Trigfa shows you how to make your daily bread.

We may not all have the space to keep a couple of pigs or a cow but anyone with an oven and a few simple kitchen implements can make bread. Whilst bread machines are handy - I use mine regularly - it's sometimes more satisfying to do the whole process by hand.

The simplest of bread consists of flour, yeast and salt, but for an easier and quicker loaf it helps to add a bit of extra sugar in order to feed the yeast.

I tend to use this recipe a couple of times a week, and it is consistently good, unlike some of my experiments using natural leavens which can be excellent, but sometimes just don't work!

The following is a simple dough which will make either 2 loaves or about a dozen rolls.

600g white strong flour
300g wholemeal bread flour
2 teaspoons yeast
2 teaspoons salt
2 teaspoons sugar

1 tablespoon oil
500 ml water (at about 20C)

First an important note about flour. Strong flour (which is sometimes sold as bread flour) contains more gluten than plain flour and it is the gluten in flour that gives bread its structure. Personally I tend to use organic bread flour for my bread as I like to know what has gone in to it, but this is just a personal preference.

For the yeast, you can either use dried yeast, which you mix with the dry flour, or fresh baker's yeast. If using fresh yeast, mix it with the sugar and 100 ml of the water first and then leave it for 10 minutes before combining with the dry ingredients.

First take a large mixing bowl and combine the dry ingredients (flours, salt, sugar, dried yeast if using)

Then slowly add the water and oil until you have a thick, slightly sticky, dough. You may find that you won't need all the water. One tip: coat your hands with a bit of olive oil before you start and you'll find it a lot easier to clean the dough off afterwards.

Once the ingredients have been combined, turn the mixture out on to a lightly oiled pastry board (this is a tip I had from Dan Lepard's excellent book "The Handmade Loaf"). You then need to knead the bread.

A word about Kneading

There has been a lot of discussion about kneading, not least over on the forums. The traditional method was to knead for 10 minutes before leaving the bread to rise. Other people have suggested that it's not the time that you knead for that is important but how many times you turn the bread over. I personally have gone over to the Dan Lepard method which is to knead for only 5-10 seconds, then leave the bread for 10 minutes covered with a flour-dusted cloth, then knead again for 10 seconds and so on. Repeat this three times.

Whichever method of kneading you use, you then leave the dough in a warm place to rise until it has doubled in volume. Then turn out again on to the oiled board.

Using a knife, divide the dough into two and roll each of these into a ball. Cover with the floured cloth and leave for another five minutes.

For loaves:

Oil a couple of tins or flour a couple of proving baskets. Rye flour works best for flouring.

Flatten the dough with your hands and then fold it into the middle, in a similar way to that in which an envelope is folded.

Then place the dough into the tin or basket.

Leave to rise again for about another hour covered with a floured tea towel.

For rolls:

Divide each ball of dough into about six pieces and roll each of these into a ball. Place on the greased baking sheet.

Preheat the oven to 200C (gas mark 6) and bake until browned (about 25 minutes for a loaf, 15 minutes for rolls). When they look done, take them out of the oven, turn them over and tap the bottom. If they sound hollow they are done, if not I put them back in upside down (without the tin) for another 5 minutes.

Leave them to cool on a wire rack.

Once you are happy with this you can try varying the method. Use fresh yeast rather than dry, or try a natural leaven (but that may be another article). Of course you can also try different combinations of flour. Spelt flour is a personal favourite.

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