

Healthy Recipes

From

Mediterranean Wellness
The Healthiest Diet on Earth



Your Daily Bread: Baguettes

Every day we drove home from Lyon to Meximieux. Every day we stopped by the bread store, to pick up a baguette of freshly baked bread for about 45 cents, or a giant “flute” for just under a dollar. It got to the point where, if the bread was a couple of hours old, we’d be grumpy. “It’s not still warm!” This was the best bread in the world, and something that we came to need every day.

It’s odd because, before we went to France, we never had bread with every meal. First of all, normal grocery stores only carried that bizarre wadable sponge of preserved high fructose corn syrup, and specialty store bread just didn’t seem worth the effort or expense. But we returned with the need to feed our fresh bread habit without spending a fortune in specialty stores. So I’ve started working on my own versions at home.

If you have a normal life – if you aren’t an heiress or related to Bill Gates – you run into a particular problem with making your own bread. All recipes call for a double rise. I always hated this. “Make the dough and then let rise until doubled in bulk, 1 – 2 hours. Punch down and let rise again for another couple of hours. Then bake it.” Who has time for this when you get home at 5:30 and have to eat sometime before midnight? There must be a solution to get fresh breads, even during the week. So I use this basic French bread recipe, but treat it like I would something made in a crock-pot. That is, make the time consuming part in the morning, let it work while I’m at work, and then finish it up in the evening.

YOU’LL NEED

1 teaspoon “instant” yeast (see tricks of the trade)
1¼ cups warm water
3 cups all-purpose flour
1 ½ teaspoons salt

IN A SMALL BOWL

Add yeast with ¼ of the warm water. Let this sit, warm itself, and come alive while you are preparing the rest of the ingredients.

Tricks of the Trade



Tricks? Making bread is all about tricks. The first one is to make sure to use good yeast – “instant” yeast – because it is more potent and will give you a better rise than “active dry yeast.”

You can activate your yeast quicker by tossing in just a bare sprinkle of sugar when it is warming itself in step one.

After the first rising and you shape it, be sure to set the loaf in a pan or container that will hold its shape. Otherwise it will “smudge” out sideways as it rises again.

You get a nice crust on the bread by brushing with water as you go. This is a bit fussy, though, and you could do the same thing by simply tossing in a couple of ice cubes during baking.

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IN A FOOD PROCESSOR OR MIXING BOWL

Combine the flour and salt with the cup of water and mix. Incorporate the yeast into the flour until it forms a slightly sticky ball. Be sure to knead (or process) the dough long enough so that it's smooth when you stretch it by hand (maybe a full minute in a processor, 10 minutes by hand).

Lay the dough out onto a board lightly dusted with flour, and knead into a nice round ball. Place this into a bowl rubbed with a smear of olive oil, cover with a cloth, and allow the yeast to fluff up the bread until it doubles in volume.

This is only the first round of rising. Now deflate our enlarged baguette-to-be and form into 2 long thin loaves. Cover these and allow to sit and rise again for at least another couple of hours.

Before putting the loaves into the oven, moisten your hands and rub over the bread. Then put them in the oven, pre-heated to 450°F for 30 minutes. After it's done, the crust should be firm and the inside light and fluffy. Remove from the oven and allow to cool on a rack for a few minutes.

PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD!



Herbed bread is wonderful. Try a teaspoon of oregano, rosemary, or cumin seeds to the loaf in your first mixing. Fresh herbs are even better.

If you're in a hurry, you can use the "fast rising yeast" and forego the second proofing altogether. Just be sure to allow it to rise the first time until it doubles (at least one hour, depending on the temperature in your house).

There is a trade off between speed and taste here! The natural fermentation that occurs within the loaf as it rises a good long time dramatically adds to the complexity of the flavors you get on the other end. Try this for yourself. Compare the quick loaf to the one that is allowed to rise the first time over night, and then again during the day. See which one has the better smell on baking and the better taste on eating!