



THE RIVER COTTAGE  
**Bread Handbook**

*by* Daniel Stevens

*introduced by* Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall









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Published in the United States by Ten Speed Press, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

[www.crownpublishing.com](http://www.crownpublishing.com)

[www.tenspeed.com](http://www.tenspeed.com)

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Originally published in slightly different form in Great Britain by  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, in 2009

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Shambhala Publications, Inc., to reprint  
an excerpt from *The Tassajara Bread Book*, by Edward Espe Brown.

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by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston,

[www.shambhala.com](http://www.shambhala.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the  
publisher.

Stevens, Daniel (Dan) River Cottage bread handbook / Daniel Stevens;  
introduction by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. — 1st U.S. ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Bread. 2. River Cottage (Television program) I. Title.

TX769.S7985 2010

641.8'15—dc22

2010010618

eISBN: 978-1-60774083-4

Project editor: Janet Illsley

**v3.1**

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**Bread is the staff of life**, the saying goes. And in that sense it is fundamental to our subsistence. But it is also fundamental to our pleasure – because good bread is the founding food of civilization. So much greater than the sum of its humble parts, it defies all logic; it is the two-plus-two-equals-five of culinary evolution.

Bread is also like humanity itself. We come in many different shapes and sizes, colors and guises, yet underneath the skin/crust, we're all made of the same stuff. And the trick of achieving happiness and harmony is surely to celebrate and enjoy both our similarities and our differences with equal vigor.

You only have to start reciting the names of the finest breads of the world to begin this process of celebration: baguette, chapati, sourdough, tortilla, ciabatta, brioche ... it's a litany of goodness. Wherever you are in the world, is there any better way of making yourself feel at home than breaking bread with the locals or if you're feeling shy, at least going to visit the local baker?

But there's no doubt that for most of us good bread still seems much easier to enjoy than to make. And I must admit that for many years bread making was, for me, something of a culinary blind spot. I largely took the view that the making of bread, like the making of wine, was something

best left to the experts. I felt I could enjoy it all the more for not knowing too much about its underlying mysteries. And then I met Dan!

When he first came to work with me in the River Cottage kitchen, Dan wasn't a particularly experienced baker – just a talented young chef long on the two qualities I look for in new recruits: curiosity and enthusiasm. But he soon decided to direct much of his energy and skill toward the blending of flour and yeast, in all its splendid forms. And as I watched him do so, I found myself revising my own rather hands-off approach to baking. His rapid and impressive progress was both engaging and infectious.

I saw that a form of cooking I had previously felt to be something of a dark art was as ready to reveal itself to the energy of the open-minded, risk-taking enthusiast as any other. It had suited me to leave bread making on the side – I had enough other stuff on my plate. But I began to follow Dan's progress, picking up a few hints and tips even as they solidified in his own mind. And I found myself becoming a better baker, just by virtue of the occasional chat with Dan – and, of course, frequent sampling of his wares.

I'm not in Dan's league, of course. He has become a truly great baker. And a great teacher too, not least because, like all the best teachers, he is happy to acknowledge that he is still

learning. What I love about this book is the irresistible way he passes on his knowledge. Like a nutty professor in his lab, he just can't wait to tell you how it all works. He hasn't lost the sense of wonder that his ingredients can really do the amazing things they do, or that the end results can be as delicious as they are.

This irrepressible enthusiasm now comes with a hefty dose of authority. Dan knows what he's talking about. He believes passionately in using the best ingredients, locally sourced where possible, and will guide you dependably to the right tools, edible and otherwise, for the job. And I can honestly say that I would now rather eat bread baked by Dan than anyone else (except perhaps my wife, who also bakes lovely bread, though sadly not nearly as often as Dan does).

And few, frankly, will be more delighted than I am to have in their hands, at last, the perfect book to help them bake better bread. This simple volume feeds my enthusiasm and knowledge, like a sourdough starter, so that I feel readier than ever to rise to the occasion. That's because Dan's creations, from the simplest flat bread to elaborate, multiseeded concoctions via the notoriously temperamental sourdoughs, are achievable and yet consistently delicious. And they are the real deal – about as far from the plastic-wrapped, machine-made monstrosities that

shamelessly pass themselves off under the name of bread as it's possible to get.

I'm thrilled that in this handbook, Dan will get to share with you, and with many, his passion and knowledge. Whether you want to know how to bash out a simple white loaf, delight your family with buttery croissants, or fling together some Middle Eastern flat breads to wrap up the meat on your grill, you can be sure you're in very safe, if rather floury, hands.

**Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, East Devon,  
February 2009**





**There is nothing in** the world as satisfying to eat as home-baked, handmade bread. Of course, technically, the artisan baker down the road is much better at it, but no amount of skill and craftsmanship can replace the utter joy of eating and sharing the stuff you make yourself. And it is practical to make bread – exceptional bread – with your own hands, in your own home, on a regular basis.

I know you are busy, so I have given you *roti* – a flat bread you can make, from cupboard to table, in less than five minutes. But I know that you also have free time, and I hope I can persuade you that free time spent in the

kitchen – by yourself, with friends, or with children, with music in your ears, wine in your glass, flour in your hair, and magic in your hands – is time that could not be better spent.

If you are new to bread making, this sense of pleasure might not be immediate, but I am confident that you will reach it more quickly than I did. I remember my first loaf well – even the birds wouldn't eat it. I had followed the two-page recipe to the letter and the cookbook assured me that "homemade bread is easy." That was rather hard to swallow (as was my bread). Still, I soldiered on, day after day. After all, practice makes perfect.

There are two kinds of bread in the world: bread that hands have made, and bread that hands have not. In an ideal world, all bread would be hands-have-made – by your hands and my hands, and by the hands of those few professional bakers left who are still doing it properly. I guess there will always be hands-have-not bread, and while it's not that bad, or at least it is surely edible, it seems a shame that bread has become so standard and commonplace that we don't even consider what a small miracle a risen loaf is.

## Mass-produced bread

Some would say that 1961 was a bad year for bread. It was the year the Chorleywood Bread Process came into being. Developed by the Flour Milling and Baking

Research Association in Chorleywood, England, the process revolutionized the baking industry. This high-speed mechanical mixing process allowed the fermentation time to be drastically reduced and meant that lower-protein British wheats could be used in place of the more expensive North American imports. Various chemical improvers and antifungal agents are necessary ingredients, as are certain hydrogenated or fractionated hard fats. This is high-output, low-labor production, designed to maximize efficiency and profit at the expense of the consumer.

Mass-produced bread is almost undoubtedly worse for you. Apart from the dubious additives and fats it contains, the short fermentation makes the wheat harder to digest. Indeed, some believe the Chorleywood processing method is partly to blame for a sharp increase in gluten intolerance and allergy. It is also probable that the prolific crossbreeding and modification of modern-day wheat, to produce stronger, tougher, harder-to-digest gluten, has contributed to wheat intolerance.

Somewhere in the region of 98 percent of bread baked in England is mass-produced, and most of it comes from around a dozen huge plant bakeries. Supermarkets love to crow about their in-store bakeries, but they are really nothing more than mini versions of these plants. And 98 percent is a lot. That means hands-have-not bread is not just the preserve of the supermarkets; it is the same bread you buy in most local “bakeries.” I’m talking about the ones that sell white pan loaves with flat tops and apple

turnovers, where there is little hint of baking activity save for the oven warming of sausage rolls, ham-and-cheese croissants, and “Cornish” pasties. The bakeries whose bread looks the same as everyone else’s ... Well, nearly everyone else’s.



## Bread from real bakeries

Real bakeries are special places where bread is made in small batches by real people's hands and baked on-site. You can tell when bread is made by hand. For a start, it will look different from other bread in other shops, because every baker has a unique, recognizable style. Shop at one regularly and you may spot changes in the bread from one morning to the next. You may even be able to tell if the baker was in a bad mood, so sensitive is real bread to the hands that make it. Some real bakeries sell their bread to local stores, which is excellent – the more places selling real bread, the better. Real bakeries are a rarity, though. If you are lucky enough to have one near you, then you would be mad not to use it. The bread will cost more ... So it should.

## Bread made at home

Home is the bakery where handmade bread does not cost more. At home, you can produce a large loaf, made with organic flour, for less than half the price of a similar-sized, mass-produced, non-organic loaf from a local shop. And your homemade bread can be great bread – even if it doesn't quite go according to plan the first time.

I still have that first bread recipe I attempted – both pages of it. And now, years later, I realize why my first loaf was such a disaster. The basic method is fine, but to

make good bread you need to understand the process. Some professional bakers and cookery writers skirt this all too briefly. As I discovered, being told what to do is simply not enough. There is so much to know, and I really believe that the more you know, the better your bread will be. Two pages? Not even the best baker in the world could teach bread in two pages.









## **Baking equipment**

You don't need a vast inventory of special equipment to bake your own bread, but there are a few items that come in very handy, most of which are inexpensive. In addition to those described below, you'll find the following everyday kitchen tools useful: a measuring cup, a rolling pin, a set of biscuit cutters, a pastry brush, an offset spatula, a bread knife (which I also use as a dough slasher), several sturdy baking sheets, a large wire cooling rack, and black trash bags (which I use over and over

again for covering my doughs). I also have a lidded crock, where my [SOURDOUGH STARTER](#) lives.

## Linen cloths

Linen draws a tiny amount of moisture from the surface of the dough, drying it just enough to prevent it from sticking. I have never found that dough sticks to a well-floured linen cloth, not even the wettest ciabatta. You can also fold the cloth to make hills and valleys to keep your loaves in shape and separate. Keep the cloths dry and you shouldn't need to wash them. At some stage of their life, you will want to replace them, but I have had mine in regular use for well over a year. Fabric shops are the best place to buy linen; a yard will be more than enough and won't cost you very much. You can use clean tea towels instead, but they may stick; all-linen tea towels would be your best option.

## Wooden boards

These are an alternative to cloths, to dust generously with flour and lay your bread on. We have two or three large (about 3½ square feet) pieces of cheap, thin plywood at River Cottage, which are excellent for large batch baking. A couple of smaller ones would certainly be useful for home baking. They are less versatile than cloths in that you cannot fold them up, but a little more practical as you can move them around with bread on. Having both a board and cloths would be perfect.

## Proofing baskets

It is nice to own a couple of proofing baskets. The best, and most expensive, are generally made of cane or reed, sometimes lined with linen, though you can buy cheaper wicker and plastic ones. They come in different shapes and sizes and are excellent for holding the shape of your loaf as it is proofing. Proofing baskets are especially useful for wetter doughs, which cannot hold their own weight (large, airy sourdoughs, for example). Lower-gluten breads also benefit from the extra support. Dust the baskets heavily with flour and lay the bread in them, smooth side down.

## Baking stone

The best way to bake bread is on a hot stone. Some kitchen shops sell them, but they are invariably too small, too thin, and too expensive. Measure your oven, then go to your local hardware store and buy the paving stone that best fits. If you do not have a baking stone, you will need a baking sheet – the larger and heavier, the better.

## Peel

A peel is a sheet of wood or metal with a handle for sliding bread into the oven. You will need one if you are using a baking stone; either buy one, make one, or use a rimless baking sheet instead. (My peel is simply a thin piece of wood with a narrow piece nailed on as a handle – see [PHOTOGRAPH](#).)

## **Dough scraper**

One of these is useful for handling and cutting the dough, and for scraping work surfaces and bowls clean. Small cheap plastic scrapers are adequate. You may already have something similar that will work; a plastic wallpaper scraper, for example.

## **Thermometer**

A special-purpose thermometer is useful for checking the temperature of oil for deep-frying. A probe cooking thermometer will do the job.

## **Water spray bottle**

I recommend one of these for spraying loaves before they go into the oven. You can buy them cheaply at garden centers and hardware stores.

## **Weighing scales**

It is well worth investing in a set of digital scales. They should measure in increments of 5g or less, and have a capacity of at least 5 pounds. Alternatively, of course, you can use balance scales.

## **Large mixing bowl**

Earthenware feels just right for making bread, but in truth, plastic and stainless steel bowls are both fine.

## Stand mixer

Although not essential for bread making, a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook can be used for kneading and is particularly helpful for softer, wetter doughs that are difficult to work by hand.



# Ingredients

The best bread comprises four simple ingredients: flour, water, yeast, and salt. It helps to know something about these. Let's start with the most important: flour.

## Flour

You must buy good flour – the best you can afford. The price of flour has increased dramatically, but making bread will always be cheaper than buying it, so you can afford the best. Natural food stores are usually good places to buy flour, but I buy mine locally from my favorite bakeries, who sell the flour they use themselves. Many supermarkets sell good-quality flour, too, alongside the cheaper stuff. I don't want pesticides, fungicides, or "anycides at all" in my bread, and I'm sure you don't either, so I suggest buying organic flour.

Most of the flour on sale is the product of roller milling. This is a large-scale, fully automated process in which the grains pass through a series of grooved rollers, sieves, aspirators, and centrifuges, which cut, grind, sift, and separate the grains to produce specified grades of flour. For white flour, the bran is removed early on and only the pale endosperm is ground. Milling whole grains produces whole-grain flour, of course, which may then be sifted to produce a lighter brown flour. An unwelcome side effect of this superefficient system is that the friction generated by the high-speed rollers can overheat the flour,



destroying valuable nutrients. Fortunately, there is still another way.

Traditional stone milling, as you can imagine, is much rougher around the edges. Grain is poured into a hole in the middle of a huge stone disk, which rotates by whatever power is available (electricity/water/wind/donkey) on top of a second, stationary disk. The resulting meal falls away from the sides, and is sieved (or not) and bagged. A preliminary sifting of the meal removes the coarser bits and gives brown flour. Subsequent siftings through finer meshes lighten and whiten the flour, but some bran will stay, so stone-ground flour will never be as white as it would be from a roller mill. That is unless it is bleached, of course. Various substances have been used to whiten flour, both stone-and roller-milled, for the last one hundred years or so, and the list reads a little scarily. Does anyone fancy a nitrogen peroxide, chlorine, chlorine dioxide, nitrosyl chloride, benzoyl peroxide, or azodicarbonamide sandwich? No, I thought not. The function of bleach is purely aesthetic and I don't really approve of such chemical interference – it is vain and unnecessary.

I love using stone-ground flour. It seems right that bread, such a basic and traditional staple, be made with basic and traditional methods. Stone milling still has the human touch, and if there is one foodstuff that should never have been sucked into the soulless, automated world of mass production, then surely it is bread. Bread that has been loved and cared for at every stage is better

bread, no question.

## Wheat flour

Of course, flours are produced from various grains, but in this country wheat flour is by far the most common. A grain of wheat is a seed and is made, basically, of three parts: the bran, which is the outside skin and comprises about 13 percent of the grain; the germ, which is the wheat plant in embryo (about 2 percent); and the endosperm (about 85 percent), which supports and feeds the germ in its early stages of growth. The bran is full of flavor and protein; the germ is full of vitamins; and the endosperm is packed with carbohydrates (in the form of starches and sugars), and contains proteins, minerals, and oil.

All of these end up in your bread, of course, and they all have an effect. The starches and sugars feed the yeast, the proteins bond to form gluten, the minerals strengthen the gluten, and the oil rather gets in the way – wriggling in between newly bonding proteins and splitting them up. It's also the first to turn rancid (which is why it's important to stick to the use-by date on your flour). However, this oil is not all bad. By clinging to the starches, and also by retaining moisture, it helps soften the bread and keep it soft for longer. Its benefits are such that extra oil (or butter or lard) is often added to bread dough, though I don't add it right away. I like to allow the proteins to bond and become inseparable first.

**Bread flour** When you mix flour with water, certain proteins in the flour (gliadin and glutenin) bond together to form gluten. Gluten is an elastic, extensible substance that forms long chains when it is softened and stretched. The more it is worked, the longer and stretchier it gets. These elastic gluten chains form a network that acts like a membrane, trapping the carbon dioxide produced by fermenting yeast and making thousands of gas pockets inside the dough.

The amount of gluten in the dough depends on the quality of the proteins in the grain. High-quality proteins will produce “strong” flour with a high percentage of gluten (up to 15 percent), which is what you want for leavened (yeasted) bread. Such flour is generally sold as bread flour, and can be whole-wheat or white. Brown flour is a sifted whole-wheat flour sold in the U.K., but it is not as common in the U.S. You can make your own by shaking coarse ground whole-wheat flour through a not-too-fine kitchen sieve to remove the coarser bits, or you can grind wheat bran and wheat germ into a powder in a blender, then sift this powder through white flour. Use 2 tablespoons of powder for each cup of flour.

**All-purpose flour** Flours with a gluten percentage of 7 to 9 percent are usually sold as all-purpose flour. Their poorer-quality gluten is less extensible and will struggle to form membranes and trap gas bubbles, so you end up with a weak structure and crumbly texture.

While this feature is not great for loaves of bread, it is perfect for biscuits, cakes, and pastry. I sometimes use a combination of all-purpose and bread flour when I am prepared to forgo some of the gluten strength in exchange for a yeast dough that is less resistant and easier to work – when I am making pizzas, for example.

**Self-rising flour** This is all-purpose flour with leavening agents added. It is most commonly used for cakes and sponge puddings, though it also forms the basis of some nonyeasted breads. I rarely have self-rising flour in my cupboard, so I usually make my own version by mixing 1 ounce (7 teaspoons) of baking powder into every 1½ pounds (5½ cups) of all-purpose flour (i.e., 4 percent by weight). With all baking, the fresher the flour the better, so I find it more convenient to have fewer open packages of different flours.

**Malted grain flour** Malting is a process by which whole grains are encouraged to germinate, producing sugars (among other things), which are then fixed by drying and browned by roasting. These now sweetly flavored grains are then added to bread flour to produce different blends, which are sold in the U.K. but are not as common in the U.S. You can make your own by mixing **BROWN BREAD FLOUR** with malted wheat flakes, available from King Arthur Flour ([www.kingarthurfLOUR.com](http://www.kingarthurfLOUR.com)). To produce a 2 pound, 3 ounce (35 ounce) batch of malted grain flour, mix 7¼ cups (2 pounds, 1.5 ounces) brown flour with 7 tablespoons (1.7 ounces) malted wheat flakes.

**00 flour** This is an Italian grade of flour, usually milled from durum wheat. It is traditionally used for making pasta but makes good bread, too. Try using it to make **CIABATTA** or **FOCACCIA** in place of the white bread flour.

## **Other grain flours**

While no other grain will make bread as light and well risen as wheat, other grains are used and each has its own character, flavor, and history. It is well worth getting

acquainted with some of the alternatives, not least because wheat intolerance seems to be on the increase.

**Spelt flour** An ancestral cousin of modern wheat, spelt is an ancient grain that has never been modified. The spelt we use today is identical to that used by the Romans for their bread.

Spelt is becoming more widely available, as flour, pasta, or puffed sugary breakfast cereal, and is recognized as a genuine alternative to wheat. It contains gluten, but the gluten in spelt is more digestible than that in wheat. You can buy white spelt flour, but if the product doesn't claim to be white, assume it is whole-grain.

Traditional whole-grain spelt flour has an orangey tinge and tastes delicious – similar to wheat and slightly nutty. It is excellent for making bread, but is also good for biscuits, cakes, and pasta. Spelt grows well in many places, including Britain.



**Rye flour** Rye thrives in cold climates and poor soil. It is widely cultivated and used across Scandinavia, Russia, and eastern Europe; it grows well in this country, too. Rye proteins form small amounts of weak gluten, producing dense, sometimes cakey, but very tasty bread. It is worth mixing rye with white bread flour for a lighter loaf. I often use rye flour for dusting shaped loaves and the baskets, boards, and cloths on which I leave them to rise. Rye is sometimes sold as light or dark, depending on the amount of whole grain left in it.

**Kamut flour** This yellowish flour is fairly low in gluten and makes decent but not remarkable bread. It isn't a flour I use, but it is appearing more often in shops and has a

tale behind it that I thought you might find interesting. The story goes that a U.S. airman, shot down over Egypt in the Second World War, discovered a few perfectly preserved grains in an ancient desert tomb. He managed to get himself and the grains to safety and brought them home, where they were discovered to be an ancient North African wheat-related grain that was thought to be extinct. It was named Kamut (now a trademark) after the Egyptian for wheat. You can buy flour milled from the great-great-great-grandchildren of the airman's grains, which are today grown exclusively in America.

**Gluten-free bread flour** This is usually made from a blend of rice, potato, tapioca, and other flours and typically contains xanthan gum, as a sort of gluten replacement. Gluten-free flours generally come with a recipe on the bag, which you should follow; the method is usually rather different from traditional bread making. Bread made with such flour is, I would say, an acquired taste ... one I've yet to acquire.



GRAIN	FLOUR TYPE	GLUTEN	USES
Wheat	Bread flour: white/whole-wheat/brown	High	Bread
	All-purpose: white/whole-wheat	Low	Pastry, pancakes, cakes, biscuits; also blended with bread flour for softer bread doughs (pizzas, flat breads), soda bread, scones
	Self-rising white	Low	Cakes, soda bread, scones
	Malted grain	High	Bread
	00 flour	High	Pasta, bread
Spelt	Whole-grain/white	Medium-high	Bread, biscuits, cakes, pasta
Rye	Dark/light	Low	Bread
Kamut		Medium	Bread
Gluten-free	White	None	Bread



## Water

Whether you use hard or soft water will make hardly any difference to your dough. Hard water is a little more alkaline than soft, and yeasts work a little more happily in a slightly acid environment, but hard water also has a higher mineral content, particularly of calcium and magnesium, which have a tightening and strengthening effect on the gluten. So, between hard and soft water, it's pretty much a wash.

I like the purity of baking with springwater. If you are lucky enough to live close to a natural spring, then you should use it; if you are happy to pay for mineral water, then do so. Otherwise, use tap water – it is perfectly good.



*Instant yeast*



*Fresh yeast*

## Yeast

The term *yeasts* refers to a group of a hundred or so varieties of single-celled organisms, collectively known as *Saccharomyces*, which are a type of fungus. They depend on carbon, but because they do not contain chlorophyll, they cannot obtain carbon from carbon dioxide in the way plants do. Instead, fungi take carbon from carbohydrates. For yeasts, the carbohydrate of choice is sugar, hence their Latin name: literally “sugar fungus.” One strain of yeast, known as brewer’s yeast, is cultivated commercially,

though you can – and I hope you will – create and nurture your own culture of wild yeasts for raising sourdough, the most satisfying bread you will ever make (see [SOURDOUGH RECIPE](#)).

Commercial yeast is cultivated in huge temperature-controlled, aerated vats filled with a solution of minerals and sugars, including molasses, malted barley, or both, and known as wort. Brewers, by the way, will find this virtually indistinguishable from the wort made in the first stages of beer making. Indeed, this method of yeast cultivation is no more than a controlled and refined version of the old practice of skimming off beer froth, then adding it to dough.

Yeast cells, known as seed yeast, are grown in laboratory conditions from a single healthy cell. The seed yeasts are added to the wort, and in this perfect feeding and reproducing environment – yeast heaven – a gluttonous orgy ensues. Yeast cells collect en masse on the surface, and are removed, washed, cooled, and either pressed into cake form (fresh yeast) or dehydrated and crumbled (dried yeast).

One single yeast cell can be grown into hundreds of tons in a matter of weeks. As there are several billion cells to the gram, this is a reproduction rate of which rabbits could only dream.

**Instant yeast** This is readily available, consistent, and reliable, and it has a long shelf life. It will become inactive eventually

though, so pay attention to the use-by date. The kind of dried yeast you are most likely to buy these days is sold in powdered form and may be labeled variously as “rapid-rise” or “fast-rising.” This is the yeast used throughout this book, which I refer to simply as instant yeast. Traditional dried yeast, which comes in little pellets, requires activating and is used slightly differently. Some yeast labels bequeath special bread-making powers upon their contents, claiming they allow you to skip an entire period of rising. Don’t be taken in by this. Yeast is yeast, and you can always skip a period of rising, but as you will learn, your bread will be less digestible for it.

**Fresh yeast** This is harder to come by than dried yeast. Try asking for fresh yeast at your local health food shop or bakery, where you may find it bagged for sale in small pieces. And you should only ever buy it in small pieces, as its active life is only around two weeks from manufacture. Fresh yeast in good condition will be a pale mushroom color, and firm. If you break it, it will snap cleanly – and the smell should be pleasant. As it stales, it becomes darker, drier, and smellier, until it breaks down into a disgusting, rancid putty (but you’ll have thrown it away by

then). As for freezing, it is generally purported that fresh yeast can be kept in the freezer, at least for short periods, but in my experience it dies more often than it lives, so I would never recommend it.

I enjoy using fresh yeast because I like the feel, the snap, and the smell. But dried yeast's long shelf life makes it more practical, especially for occasional baking. As for the all-important performance – the ability to make good bread – frankly, I have no preference for fresh over dried. I just can't tell the difference. I nearly always use instant yeast, which can be mixed straight into the dough. It is best to blend fresh yeast or dried pellet yeast with a little liquid first; if you do not, it is unlikely to fully blend.

For simplicity, all yeasted recipes in this book assume the use of instant yeast. If, however, you prefer to use fresh yeast, simply double the quantity given in the recipe.

**How yeast works** When you mix yeast with flour and wet it, various things start to happen. In addition to the wheat producing its own enzymes, which begin to convert starch to sugar, the yeast cells produce several enzymes of their own, which convert



the various sugars in the flour into forms the yeast can absorb. This is how yeast feeds. More enzymes inside the yeast cell convert these sugars into carbon dioxide and alcohol (among other things), which are excreted. The carbon dioxide forms into bubbles inside the dough and causes it to rise. This is fermentation (from the Latin *fermo*, meaning “to boil,” as the bubbles bear a resemblance to boiling). This enzyme activity helps to make the tough gluten in the flour more digestible. Not surprisingly, bread that ferments for longer is better for you.

After feeding heartily, and passing gas accordingly, the yeast cell’s attention turns, inevitably, to reproduction. So it splits in two. Two become four, then eight, sixteen, and so on. Meanwhile, some of the excreted alcohol is converted into acetic acid, which slightly raises the acidity of the dough. Yeasts like that, and their activity increases because of it. All this rumpus noticeably raises the temperature of the dough. Other acids, including lactic and carbonic acid, are produced. And the heady combination of acid and alcohol creates esters, aromatic molecules that contribute to the flavor of the finished bread. The longer fermentation goes on, the more of these reactions take place, and the more reactions, the more flavor.

Quite simply, bread that takes longer to rise tastes better.

Dough temperature is a key factor in the rate of yeast activity: between 77° and 86°F, it will be reasonably vigorous. Temperatures somewhat higher than this will increase this vigor, resulting in a dough that rises faster, but they will also cause the yeast to produce some undesirable sour flavors. Yeasts will start to feel a little uncomfortable above about 113°F; at around 140°F they will die – which is what happens in the oven, of course. Going the other way, activity will reduce to a steady rate, becoming fairly slow at around 68°F, and will practically stop at perhaps 36°F and below, where the yeast will lie dormant until it either dies from not feeding (after maybe a couple of weeks), is warmed up (when it will pick up where it left off), or is frozen. Although I'm reluctant to advise freezing fresh yeast, I have never had problems freezing yeasted dough, at least for a short time (up to six months); it always reactivates on thawing.

While you can control the rate of fermentation by controlling dough temperature, you can also affect it by the amount of yeast you add. Obviously, the less yeast, the slower the rate. This can be

literally as little as you like – remember what that single cell can do.



## Salt

Although it isn't essential to add salt to bread, I would never consider leaving it out, as unsalted bread tastes so unlovely. Nevertheless, salt has a dark side (ask any slug).

When it comes across yeast (and slugs), salt has a propensity to murder. So you must mediate, and you must keep them apart. That said, this only really applies to fresh yeast or dried yeast that you have rehydrated; dry salt won't react with dry yeast.

Either way, as you mix and the salt is dispersed, its capacity to harm becomes diluted. Yeast activity is nevertheless inhibited in salted dough, the result being that fermentation is slower than it would otherwise be. Also, salt has a tightening effect on the gluten network, making it stronger and more stable. Gas bubbles are trapped more effectively, and the bread rises higher and more evenly. Salt also helps bread to retain moisture, and salted bread therefore lasts longer.

So salt is a good addition, but which salt is best? There are several methods of harvesting salt from the earth. Rock salt is mined from salt beds, often deep underground. Water also percolates naturally (or is pumped) through to these beds, dissolving the salt and forming a brine, which can be pumped up to the surface and evaporated to form salt.

Sea salt comes from seawater, which is either allowed to evaporate naturally or boiled dry – the quicker method, which results in smaller, harder crystals. The more time-consuming natural drying results in beautiful large crystals, which are sold as flaky sea salt (Maldon is the best known), and are expensive.

Any salt you are likely to buy will contain impurities, although this is not necessarily a bad thing. Unrefined sea

salt, for example, will contain traces of calcium, magnesium, and other chlorides and sulfates. The content of salt (sodium chloride) and the concentrations of other minerals mixed with it vary according to where it comes from. This, along with the different methods of harvesting, accounts for the marked variety of natural salts available. French *sel gris* (gray salt), for example, is exactly that – gray, due to its high proportion of other minerals. By contrast, cheap, free-flowing table salt and cooking salt may be technically more pure but will have additives, including anticaking agents – magnesium carbonate and sodium ferrocyanide.

Some of the impurities found in untreated salt will have an effect on your dough (calcium and magnesium will further tighten the gluten, for example), but I doubt you will notice the difference. My personal preference is for unrefined sea salt, but in all honesty, for baking I have found standard table salt to be absolutely fine.

Whatever salt you use, it must be ground finely or it will not mix in properly. You can do this yourself, in a spice mill or a mortar and pestle.



## Other ingredients

Now that you have the basics, you can take your bread in any number of directions, with the judicious addition of some choice ingredients. I have offered some suggestions here, though of course you can add what you please. Just don't add things for the sake of it. You could put olives in your bread, but they are better in a bowl. Cheese bread is good, but eating cheese with bread is better. I have seen bread made with fennel seeds and liquidized mussels. No, seriously. Give me some fennel seed bread and a bowl of mussels any day.

**Liquids** You do not have to make bread with water. Milk, or even yogurt, is excellent, and will make bread softer and (in the case of white bread) whiter. Cider and beer can be interesting, though I prefer to water them down a bit. Apple juice is lovely, as long as it is real apple juice.

**Fat** As I have said, putting fat in your bread will make it a little softer and will slightly improve its keeping qualities. Stronger-tasting fats will, of course, add their own hint of flavor, though these effects are not radical. Suffice it to say that any animal fats and any edible oils can be used.

**Honey** Natural and good for you, honey adds

a beguiling sweetness to bread.

**Oats** An essential ingredient in Scottish baking, oats are highly nutritious. I always have coarsely ground oats, medium-ground oats, and rolled oats in the cupboard, and I eat them most days, in some form or other. To make your own coarsely ground oats, grind oat flakes in a blender or food processor until they are about the size and shape of oat bran. For medium-ground or finely ground oats, process them a bit longer until they reach a medium or fine consistency.

**Cornmeal** In Italy, this is known as polenta and is often cooked as a porridge. It doesn't contain gluten and is therefore unsuitable for making risen loaves. However, cornmeal has a distinctive taste, and **CORNBREAD**, which is usually cooked in a cast-iron skillet or frying pan, has a good flavor.

**Millet** This is a highly nutritional grain and tastes rather like oats. It can be cooked and eaten in a way similar to couscous. A couple of handfuls of millet, flaked or ground, can be added to bread dough for a bit of a health boost.



**Barley** Lacking gluten, barley is unsuitable for making bread on its own, but I like to add barley flakes and barley meal to doughs. I also use them for dusting loaves.

**Buckwheat** In truth, this is not wheat; it is not even a grain. Surprisingly, perhaps, it is related to rhubarb. In Russia, buckwheat flour is used to make **BLINIS**; a handful or two in your dough will add flavor and iron to your bread.

**Semolina** In Italian, this term means “half-milled.” Semolina is a coarse grade of flour, usually made from durum wheat – the classic wheat for making pasta. I use it in **CIABATTA**, and for dusting the outside of **ENGLISH MUFFINS**.

**Seeds** There is a simple rule here. If seeds taste pleasant, use them; if they taste strong, use less of them. Buy every variety of seeds available and have fun experimenting. I especially like sunflower, pumpkin, poppy, and fennel; add sesame and flaxseed to these and you have my favorite six-seed blend.

**Dried fruit** As with seeds, use these with restraint. You cannot get away from the fact

that adding fruit to bread turns it into fruit bread.

**Nuts** I use hazelnuts a lot, because I love them. To remove their skins, first shake the nuts in a dry frying pan over medium heat until the skins turn dark and brittle like smoldered paper, then rub them in a clean tea towel and the nuts will shed their skins. Walnuts are worth a mention, too. Make whole-grain bread with walnuts and some honey, and a Stilton sandwich could hardly taste any better. As with seeds, if you like a nut, your bread will, too.







## Bread Making Step-by-Step

I'm not going to tell you that making really good bread at home is easy. To begin with, it may take you many attempts to make a loaf that you are truly proud of – and even then, the next one might let you down. But if bread making were a piece of cake, it wouldn't feel so amazing when you get it right. And no matter how many loaves you bake in your life, it *always* feels great when you get it right. Bread making is no mystery either, though it helps to know the science – to understand what happens when you make bread, and what affects it.

I have gone into a lot of detail in this section, and I make no apology for that. The more you understand, the better your bread will be. Take your time to absorb as much as you can about each of the bread-making stages before you begin baking. Once you are in the kitchen and the flour starts flying, you will find it easier to follow my own two-page [bread recipe](#). It is actually a distillation of the basic method covered here; words highlighted in bold refer back to the headings in this section, for easy reference. I also show you how to adapt the recipe with infinite variations, including a few suggestions of my own, so that you may become master of your own bakery.

Anyone who bakes regularly will know that it is easy to get carried away in pursuit of the perfect loaf. I have often been unhappy with a totally decent batch of bread for no other reason than that my last batch was better. Seek perfection, by all means, but please, don't be too hard on yourself. Always keep in mind the following wisdom, from the beautiful *Tassajara Bread Book*:

*There are no mistakes. You might do it differently next time, but that's because you did it this way this time. Perfect, even if you say too much this, too little that. It's you and please be yourself.*



# Bread making step-by-step

- Measure the ingredients
- Mix the dough
- Knead the dough
- Shape the dough into a round
- Let ferment
- Deflate the dough
- Let rise again
- Prepare for baking
- Divide the dough
- Shape the loaves
- Coat the outside
- Let proof
- Transfer the loaves for baking
- Slash the tops
- Bake the bread
- Let cool
- Look after your bread





## Measure the ingredients

There is a quick and easy formula for calculating the amount of each ingredient you need when making a batch of bread. Many professional bakers use this method, I use it, and you should learn it. It is known as the baker's percentage, and this is how it works: First, decide how much flour you want to use. I suggest 2 pounds, 3 ounces (35 ounces): the quantity of dough will be a comfortable size for kneading and will yield two large or three small loaves, or perhaps a dozen rolls – a good batch size for most ovens and most households (eat some, freeze some). Taking the weight of flour as 100 percent, you measure every other ingredient as a percentage of this.

### Water

The percentage of water to flour is sometimes referred to as hydration. Different flours absorb different amounts of water, but a good starting point for a soft, kneadable dough using white flour is 60 parts water to 100 parts flour. This is 60 percent hydration, or simply 60 percent. So, for 35 ounces of flour, you would use 21 ounces of water ( $35 \times 0.6 = 21$ ). Although 1 fluid ounce of water weighs about 1 ounce, in baking we need to be precise, so 21 ounces = 20 fluid ounces =  $2\frac{1}{2}$  cups.

You may find that you need more water than this. For example, whole-grain flour, which often absorbs more water than white flour, may take 65 percent hydration to

produce a workable dough. Or you may want to make a wetter dough. For instance, if you are making [CIABATTA](#), hydration is around 80 percent. However, you will never want to make a drier dough, so use 60 percent as your starting point.

## Yeast

As a general rule, use 1 percent for instant yeast, and 2 percent for fresh. You can use less than this, which makes for a longer, slower fermentation, but you shouldn't really use more, otherwise your bread may taste overly yeasty.

## Salt

The standard amount of salt is 2 percent. There is a little flexibility here, but only a little. I generally use 2.5 percent for sourdough, for example. A loaf containing 3 percent salt will taste a bit salty for most people. With 1 percent salt, your bread will be a little bland.

## Fat

Though I would not call fat a basic ingredient, I usually add it to bread dough in some form (usually sunflower or olive oil, occasionally melted butter or lard). You could certainly leave it out. But fat will give you bread with a slightly softer crumb, which keeps slightly better. I generally go for a good slug per 35 ounces. I've just measured a good slug – it was a little over a tablespoon, about 0.7 ounce. That's about 2 percent, the same as the

salt.

So our batch looks like this:

Flour	35 ounces (100 percent)
Water	2½ cups (60 percent)
Instant yeast	0.35 ounce (1 percent), or 0.7 ounce (2 percent) if using fresh yeast
Salt	0.7 ounce (2 percent)
Fat (optional)	A slug (a generous tablespoonful), about 0.7 ounce (2 percent)

Before long, you will become so accustomed to these percentages that they will become second nature, allowing you to confidently make bread, anytime, anywhere. It is best to own an electronic scale, which will enable you to accurately measure your ingredients to within a few grams. If you do not, you will have to rough it a little, in which case it will help you to know that 0.7 ounce fine salt is about 4 level teaspoons, and 0.35 ounce instant yeast is about 1 tablespoon.

In addition to the above, all manner of ingredients can be added in small quantities to dough to enhance the flavor or add interest to the texture.

## Extras

Small dry ingredients, such as seeds or grains, are generally added in with the flour, yeast, and salt. Nuts and

dried fruit are better kneaded in later.

### **Adding a little old dough or a starter**

A common practice in artisan bakery is to keep back a little dough from each batch to incorporate into the next day's baking. Old dough has had time to mature and develop flavor from the yeast activity, so adding a lump (as much as you like) of this a day or two or even a week after you made it adds depth and character to a new batch. You can do this with any of the mixing methods; add it to your dough just before, or just after, you add the fat. Of course, you will not have any old dough the first time you bake.

If you keep a [SOURDOUGH STARTER](#), you can add a ladleful to your yeasted dough with similar results; this is what I do.



# Mix the dough

There are three methods that I use to make a dough. Any of these will work for pretty much any bread; try them all and see which you are most comfortable with.

## The one-stage mixing method

The one-stage mixing method is the simplest. All the basic ingredients are mixed to a dough and kneaded right away. At home, I nearly always make bread this way.

Add the flour, water, yeast, and salt to your mixing bowl. Using two fingers of one hand, mix until you have formed a very rough, soft dough, adding more water if the dough is dry. Add the fat, if using, and squish it all together.

## The two-stage mixing method

In two-stage mixing, a flour and water dough is made and left to rest, before the yeast and salt are added. This allows the gluten to develop by itself. The effect is remarkable – the dough is easier to work, and it takes less time to knead. It's particularly good for a large amount of dough, which can be hard on your arms; I often use this method at River Cottage, where we generally make 9-pound batches. The downside is that the yeast and salt don't blend as easily. They will eventually, but the dough will be slower to start fermenting.

Mix the water with the flour in the mixing bowl to form

a rough dough, adding more water if you need to. Cover and let it rest for about 30 minutes, then add the salt, yeast, and fat, if using, and squish it all together.

## The sponge method

The sponge method is particularly good for **SOURDOUGH**, but will benefit any bread. You start with a yeasted, unsalted batter (the sponge), which is left to ferment and mature for several hours. This wet, salt-free environment allows the yeast to ferment vigorously, and the extra-long fermentation will produce bread with more flavor. I would like to use this method more often, but you need to start it off the night before, which I'm inclined to forget to do. Hopefully, you will be more organized and remember to do so.

Before bedtime, mix half of the measured quantity of flour with all of the water and all of the yeast. Beat the mixture to a thick batter, using a stiff whisk if you wish, though stiff fingers work better. The following morning, add the rest of the flour and the salt. Mix to a rough dough, adding a little more water if it is too dry, and then add the fat, if you are using it.







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## Knead the dough

First, a note on your work surface: it needs to be flat and smooth. A craggy surface will trap bits of dough; even worse, the dough will pick up whatever is already trapped there. It should also be solid; a flimsy table won't stand up to your vigorous kneading. If you have a wooden work surface, so much the better – wood is generally warmer than formica, granite, or stainless steel. What is more important is that you have plenty of room – a good 3 feet of width, and maybe an arm's length in depth – for

effective kneading. It also makes sense to clear the area a bit. Put away the dishes and move the toaster, as flour and dough tend to get everywhere. And wear an apron.

Tip and scrape your dough out of the bowl and onto your work surface. Clean and dry your hands – rub them together with a little flour to get the worst of the dough off, then wash them. By now, your dough is probably well glued to the work surface. Good ... you want it to stick. Kneading is all about stretching the gluten; if the dough sticks to the surface, it's doing most of the work of one hand. It is going to stick to your hands as well. This is okay, but the faster you work, the less it will stick. You will get better at this, I promise.

Flour your hands a little. Now, with your left hand if you're right-handed, right hand if you're left-handed, press down on the dough with your fingertips, about a third of the way up (PIC 1). With the heel of your other hand, in one smooth, quick motion, press into though just above your first hand and push down and away, a full arm's length if you have room (PIC 2). Now cup the fingers of this hand and scrape or roll the torn, ripped-up dough back on top of itself (PIC 3). Turn the whole dough around roughly 90 degrees (PIC 4). Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Have a look at the dough as you stretch it. You will see long, thin strands developing – this is gluten.

At first, dough will stick all over you. From time to time, stop and clean your hands with more flour. With time and practice, the whole thing will become one smooth operation. In fact, the 90-degree rotation will

merge seamlessly into the next stretch. With each stretch, the dough will become a little less sticky. After a good 5 minutes, it probably won't be sticking much to anything. The dough will have tightened considerably; it will no longer be breaking into pieces, and you will find it more resistant to your stretching. Adapt your kneading action as the dough changes. Start to use shorter and shorter strokes, until you are only stretching it to around double its length. From time to time, spend half a minute or so **SHAPING YOUR DOUGH** into a nice tight round, following the method. Get used to shaping dough into a round; it keeps you in control. If ever your dough is sticky, slack, or unruly and getting the better of you, shape it into a round and you will tame it instantly.

You can knead bread in a machine, of course. Stand mixers often have a dough hook attachment and can just about take a 35-ounce batch of dough. Be warned, though, that they get pretty hot with the effort, and mine has a tendency to "walk" alarmingly across (and once, when I wasn't looking, off) the work surface. I now only use my mixer for softer, wetter, less strenuous doughs, and it is happier for it.

Kneading can take anywhere between 5 and 15 minutes, depending on the flour, your chosen mixing method, your kneading speed, and the size of the dough. Every now and then, try to form a membrane by stretching the dough thinly. Do this every couple of minutes. Each time, you should be able to stretch it thinner than the last. How thinly you can eventually stretch it will depend on the

flour you are using. A white dough can usually be stretched quite thinly ([PIC 5](#)), more so than a whole-wheat dough ([PIC 6](#)). Dough made from a low-gluten flour, such as rye, will break readily ([PIC 7](#)), despite your best efforts. When you feel your dough cannot be stretched any thinner, it is ready. As a guide, a dough made from bread flour should be able to stretch thinly enough to let daylight through, at least. Get it as thin as a pair of tights, and either your dough is amazing or your tights are too thick.

A small word of caution: It is possible for dough to be overkneaded. At some point, the gluten structure will collapse and the dough will revert to being soft and sticky, a calamitous position from which it will not recover. This is rare when kneading by hand. It is a peril more associated with kneading by machine, in which case vigilance and a slow mixing speed are your best safeguards.

If you are using larger extras, like nuts and fruit, you will need to incorporate them at the end of kneading. Stretch the dough out on the work surface, scatter to ingredients over the dough, then fold, roll, and knead briefly to disperse them.





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## Shape the dough into a round

When you are satisfied with your dough, you should shape it into a round. It will then rise evenly, and you can more easily gauge its progress. This also encourages the yeast to work for you during rising. As it ferments, the gas bubbles gently stretch the strands of gluten, and this stretching is most effective if the strands are taut to begin with, which they will be if you do this.

Lay your dough, smoothest side facing down, on the work surface and prod a little with all your fingers to



flatten it (PIC 8). Now, with one or two fingers and a thumb, lift an edge, fold it into the middle, and press down (PIC 9). Make about an eighth turn of the dough, pick up the edge at the side of the fold you just made, and press into the middle. Repeat until you get back to where you started (PIC 10). Now flip it over (PIC 11). You should have a nice, smooth, round dough. Put your hands flat on the work surface, palms up, on either side of the dough, one forward, one back (PIC 12). Now, in a fluid motion, bring your hands together under the dough, at the same time sliding the forward hand back and the back hand forward (PIC 13). This both spins the dough and stretches the upper surface down and under. Repeat this spinning action two or three times. With practice, you can start to cup your hands around the dough; the point of the flat hands is to discipline yourself to use the inside edges of your palms and little fingers to do the stretching work.



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## Let ferment

First you need to find a container in which your dough can comfortably double in size without billowing over the top. This may well be the mixing bowl you started off with, but give it a quick wipe first and dry with a tea towel.

Now you can either flour the dough all over or oil it. If you added oil to the dough, it makes sense to use the same type of oil, but any oil will be fine. Oiling is slightly

better than flouring, as it makes an airtight coating, which prevents the dough from drying out. It also enables you to oil the container, which makes it easier to turn the dough out later. (Don't oil the container if you have floured the dough, though; you will just make oily flour lumps.)

Either way, put the dough into the container and cover it. I find the simplest way is to put the container in a black trash bag and tuck the opening underneath. This makes a lovely environment for your dough – a little humidity from the fermentation process, and a little extra warmth from the bag (black absorbs and radiates heat). Covering the bowl with plastic wrap would be nearly as good, though a little more wasteful, as you can't reuse it.

Now you need to leave your dough to rise in a warmish place. A pleasantly heated kitchen is ideal, but a slightly cold room is still fine – the dough will just take longer to rise. For a really slow overnight rise, you could put the covered dough in the fridge, but you will rarely want to (unless you are making [BRIOCHE](#)).

During this period of rising, we want the gluten to be stretched by the activity of the yeast to the limit of its elasticity, at which point the dough will have roughly doubled in size. Beyond this, the dough noticeably loses its structure and elasticity; it will start to look flaccid and a bit holey. This is not a disaster, but the dough will be a little weaker for it.

## Deflate the dough

Once the dough has risen sufficiently, uncover and tip it out onto your lightly floured work surface ([PIC 14](#)). Gently press into the dough with your fingertips and squash it all over ([PIC 15](#)), until it is roughly the size you started with. A common term for this is punching down, which suggests battering – a level of domestic violence not conducive to a happy relationship with your bread. You have spent a long time loving it ... Don't ruin it all now.









## Let rise again (optional)

You can now let your dough rise a second time, following the same spinning and shaping process as before, in order to further mature and improve it. You can even repeat the rising and deflating process three, four, maybe five times. Each time, you'll notice the dough becoming more satiny and pillowy. You cannot do this indefinitely, though. Eventually there will be no sugars left for the yeast to feed on, and you need it to have enough oomph for the **FINAL PROOF** before baking.

## Prepare for baking

Before you shape your loaves, which you are about to do, it is worth getting ready to bake them. Timing becomes fairly critical later, and you don't want to get caught out, with a cold oven, for example. So, turn on the oven now – to maximum.

With the odd exception, for the first 5 to 10 minutes of baking, you want two things in your oven (besides the bread). The first is as much heat as you can get. With enough heat, your bread will rise dramatically in the oven. Known as oven spring, this rising is caused by the heat-induced expansion of the gas bubbles in the dough; this expansion will continue until the crust hardens enough to suppress it. I think 500°F is the upper limit, but most domestic ovens don't get that high, so my advice is

simply to turn up the dial as far as it will go.

If you have a [BAKING STONE](#), it should be in the oven from the start, on the middle shelf or thereabouts (remember, your bread needs plenty of headroom). If not, find your largest, heaviest baking sheet and use it in the same way. You will be baking your bread directly on this, somewhat replicating the old, traditional brick-floored bakers' ovens. (You can replicate these even better by building one of your own; see [Building a CLAY OVEN](#)) If using a baking sheet, you can remove it from the oven to load the bread, but this is not practical with a heavy stone. You will need to leave it in the oven and use a [PEEL](#) to slip the bread onto it.

The second thing you want is steam. If the air in your oven is humid, the crust will take longer to dry, so it stays soft for longer and the bread can rise higher and more evenly. To mimic a professional baker's steam-injected oven, I heat a heavy roasting pan in the bottom of the oven, then pour in boiling water from the kettle when I put the bread in. This gives a nice whack of steam right away, as well as some slow-release steam for a few minutes afterward. I also use a spray bottle, the kind you get in a garden center, to wet the bread just before it goes in. This goes some way toward making up for the lack of sophisticated technology in a domestic oven.

With your oven set up, you should clear space around it. You'll need to work fast, so move anything you might crash into. You will also need a sharp serrated knife for slashing the loaves, if you so wish, and an oven mitt if you

are using a baking sheet. Have these within grabbing distance of the oven, along with your spray bottle if you have one. Put some water in the kettle, ready to boil. With everything in place and your oven gently warming your kitchen, you are ready to shape your bread.



## Divide the dough

First, divide your dough as precisely as you can. Make your loaves or rolls the same size and shape, and they'll cook in the same time. If you started with a 35-ounce

batch of flour, the weight of the dough will be a little over 56 ounces (35 ounces of flour and 21 ounces of water, plus a little salt, yeast, etc.). Halve this and you'll make two 28-ounce loaves. I never make loaves much larger than this. My preference is for loaves of 18 to 21 ounces, so I usually divide my batch into three. If you want rolls, weigh them at 4.3 ounces and you'll get a baker's dozen. Keep some dough back for your next baking session, if you wish.

Thus divided, your loaves-to-be must be **SHAPED INTO ROUNDS**, lightly floured, and left to rest on the work surface, covered with plastic wrap. This intermediate shaping stage is key to getting an even, uniform finish to your loaf. About 10 to 15 minutes' rest is ideal, just to relax the gluten, in preparation for the final shaping.



## Shape the loaves

You can make any shape of loaf you like, but I tend to stick to just four shapes: [A ROUND](#), a tapered baton, a baguette-type stick, and a sort of stubby cylinder, which is my favorite. I rarely bake bread in a loaf pan, because I much prefer the appearance of a naturally formed loaf; also, I don't much like the texture of the pale lower crust of a pan loaf. But for those of you who would like to use a loaf pan, I will show you how to shape the dough for it. However you want to shape your bread, I will make the

assumption that your dough is already formed into loose rounds and lightly floured.

### A baguette-type stick

I usually make four of these long, thin loaves from a 35-ounce batch of flour, so they weigh about 14 ounces each. With the dough smooth side down on your work surface, prod it flat, then roll it up toward you fairly tightly. Now working with both hands flat, roll and stretch the dough like a Play-Doh snake, as thin and long as you like, remembering, of course, that it still has to fit in your oven. You can leave the ends rounded, but I like to taper them into a tight point, in which case do as for [A TAPERED BATON](#), but press a little harder.



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## A tapered baton

With your dough smooth side down, prod all over with your fingertips to flatten it ([PIC 16](#)). Fold the top edge down to the middle ([PIC 17](#)) and press along the seam. Fold the two top corners in toward the middle at a 45-degree angle ([PIC 18](#)) and press down along the edges. Roll it up tightly, starting from the top ([PIC 19](#)), and press all along the seam to seal ([PIC 20](#)). Now, with your hands cupped over the dough, roll it back and forth, using increasing pressure on the outsides of your hands to taper the ends ([PIC 21](#)).

## A stubby cylinder

There is rather more to shaping this loaf than may be apparent from its appearance. Of the various loaves described, this shaping is the most complicated procedure, and it takes a little more practice to perfect. The result is a really tightly molded loaf that holds its

shape brilliantly and rises dramatically in the oven. It is the loaf I bake more often than not, partly because it delivers just the right proportion of lovely, crisp crust and soft, chewy interior.

To shape a stubby cylinder, lay the dough smooth side down and prod it flat with your fingertips. Roll it up tightly toward you, using the fleshy part of your thumbs to really tuck it in (PIC 22). With the seam upward, press all along the seam with your fingertips (PIC 23). Now flatten and stretch the dough sideways to about twice its width (PIC 24). Fold one end in by a third and fold the other over it (PIC 25). Flatten with your fingertips to a rough square (PIC 26), then roll up tightly (PIC 27). Seal the seam by pressing with your fingertips, then roll gently to get an even shape (PIC 28).



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## A pan loaf

With your dough smooth side down, prod it fairly flat with your fingertips until it is as wide as your pan is long. Now roll up the dough toward you as tightly as you can, then press along the seam with your fingers and lay seam side down. Smooth and stretch the ends down and tuck them underneath. Lift up the dough and drop it into the loaf pan.



## Rolls

Weigh or slice off pieces of dough between 3½ ounces and 5¼ ounces, according to how large you want your rolls to be, but do try to keep them roughly the same size. Choose any shape you like – I favor a round or a tapered baton. To shape rounds, simply follow the technique for [SHAPING A BATCH OF DOUGH](#); [FOR TAPERED BATONS](#), shape as for a large loaf.



## Coat the outside

You can leave your loaves naked, but they will be much more grateful – and feel much more beautiful – if you give them a lovely coat to wear. Select a flour, or choose grains and seeds.

### Flour

You can use the same flour that you made your bread with, but I usually use rye flour. It gives a pleasing grayish, matte surface to the finished loaf that contrasts beautifully with the golden brown of the opened-out slashes. Coarse-milled flours – whole-grain rather than white – give a better finish, in my view. Drop a fistful of flour on top of the shaped loaf and roll it about to coat it all over and under.



## Grains and seeds

Roll your bread thoroughly in a bowl of milk or water, then in a bowl of one or more of the following: rolled oats, barley, rye or millet flakes, bran, cracked wheat, flaxseed, or other mild-tasting seeds, such as poppy, sesame, pumpkin, or sunflower seeds. You could also include a small amount of stronger-flavored seeds like cumin, caraway, coriander, and fennel in your mix. Coat the loaves generously – they should be totally covered. Pat all over to help everything stick.





## Let proof

Proofing is the final rising of your shaped loaf before baking (the fact that your dough rises a final time “proves” that it is still active). If you are not baking in a loaf pan, you will need to sit it **IN A BASKET, OR ON A CLOTH OR BOARD**. Whichever you use, dust it generously with flour – I usually use rye, for reasons given earlier, but any will do. Loaves in proofing baskets should always be smooth side down. With linen cloths or wooden boards, I suggest proofing loaves smooth side up, as they will keep their shape better this way. If you are using cloths, you can fold them up a little to give some support to the sides of the loaves. This is particularly effective with baguettes. Always cover your dough with plastic bags.

Giving precise times for proofing is not helpful but, again, you want the dough to roughly double in size; this could take as little as 20 minutes, or as long as 2 hours, depending on the vigor with which the dough is fermenting.

Keep an eye on the dough as it proofs. When it's looking significantly bigger, give it a gentle squeeze at the sides. Do this every so often, and you will feel it getting lighter and airier. If, after such a gentle squeeze, the dough springs airily back to its original shape, and if it has almost (but not quite) doubled in size, it is about right. It is hard to describe the perfect moment in words. The best I can say is that a really well-shaped, tightly

molded, perfectly risen loaf has a certain look and feel about it, as if it is just bursting to be baked.

If the bread is overproofed, the gluten will lose its structure, the dough will start to look a little saggy, and the finished crumb will end up coarse and too holey. Underproofed bread will be a little dense and heavy – and also prone to the dreaded “flying crust” syndrome, whereby the top crust deceitfully balloons away from the rest of the dough in the oven.

You should err on the side of under-rather than overproofing, though; it will rise some more in the oven.

## Transfer the loaves for baking

If you are using a baking sheet, get it out of the oven, shut the door quickly, and set the hot pan close to your bread. If you are using a baking stone, lay the peel on the work surface.

If you’ve proofed your bread in baskets, use one hand to gently support the bread as you tip it out onto the baking sheet or peel; it will now be right side up. If you have used cloths or boards, the loaves are already right side up. To pick one up, roll it toward you so you can get your hands on the underside, then roll it back onto your hands and lift it.

If you are using a baking sheet, leave as much space as you can between the loaves. If you are using a peel, then you will need to work one loaf (or a few rolls) at a time.

Flour the peel if your bread is in any way sticky, then lay one loaf (or a few rolls) along the leading edge.



## Slash the tops

Making cuts in a loaf helps it to expand in the oven. Proofed bread already has a slightly dry crust from contact with the air, which inhibits rising, and slashing through this crust exposes the soft, stretchy dough inside. I nearly always slash my bread, but there are a couple of exceptions. I usually leave round rolls just as they are – they stay rounder that way. And low-gluten breads, such as rye, rise very little in the oven, so the slashes are, in effect, redundant – they would open only a little, which looks ugly. Low-gluten breads have a beauty all their own. During proofing, because of the low surface tension, the dough crackles all over as it expands, like a shattered windscreen.

Many bakers use an old-fashioned razor blade for slashing. I prefer a sharp, long-bladed, serrated knife – a bread knife, in fact. Don't just pile in. Imagine a line on the dough, then cut along it, using your spare hand just to hold the loaf in place. Use long strokes and be controlled but confident. It is crucial that you don't press down when you cut – you will squash the dough and press out precious gas. Work swiftly, but don't rush – you will end up snagging and stretching the dough. Slash up to ½ inch deep, using two or three strokes on each cut if you need to. Make your slashes evenly deep and evenly spaced.

Your slashes should be simple. Beautiful though they can be, they are not made purely for decoration – they have a job to do, which is to help the bread expand. And

they will do their job that much better if you let the gluten help, too. Let me explain how.

When you shaped the loaves tightly, you put tension on the gluten; now you can use this tension to pull the slashes open. Round loaves have equal tension all around, pulling outward and downward, so a cut in any direction will open well. All the **LONGER-SHAPED LOAVES** have lateral tension. They have been rolled up, like a carpet or a coiled spring. The more you cut across (perpendicular to) this tense gluten, the more the cuts will open. So a lengthwise cut opens most, and crosswise cuts open least. Experiment with the different options and decide which you like the look of best. Scoring the loaf on the diagonal is a good compromise.

Slashing is a very good test of the quality of your dough. If it is well kneaded and perfectly risen, the cuts will open out even as you make them.





## Bake the bread

Once you've slashed your loaf (or not), spray it all over with water, if you want to (see [PREPARE FOR BAKING](#)). Now either put the baking sheet in the oven or slip the dough from the peel onto the baking stone. To do this, lay the front edge of the peel in position, resting on the stone, then pull it away, like a tablecloth party trick.

As soon as all the loaves are in, pour a good slosh of boiling water from the kettle into the roasting pan (keep your face back) and shut the door. Do all this as fast as you possibly can, to keep the precious heat in.

Now, for a few minutes at least, you must leave the door shut to keep the heat in; this is the time for oven spring, the final rise before the crust hardens. After 10 minutes, have a look. Rotate the bread about if it is coloring unevenly and lower the temperature to:

400°F	if the crust is still very pale
350°F	if the crust is noticeably browning
325°F	if the crust seems to be browning quickly

These temperatures apply to convection ovens. If you are using a conventional gas or electric oven, you will need to have your oven approximately 25°F hotter. Continue baking, adjusting the temperature as you see fit. The total baking time will depend on your particular oven and the size of your loaves. If during baking the crust appears to be fully browned, cover it loosely with foil to prevent

overbrowning.

Use the following chart as a guide, but rely on your own judgment. These represent total baking time in the oven:

12 rolls	10–20 minutes
3 small loaves	30–40 minutes
2 large loaves	40–50 minutes

When your bread is fully baked, it will feel lighter than when it went in. This is because it will have lost about 20 percent of its weight through evaporation. The crust should feel firm (though less so on rolls), and it should sound hollow when tapped on the base. This is no definitive test, though – a loaf will also sound hollow when it could really do with another 10 minutes of baking. So if in doubt, bake for a bit longer. If your bread is a little overbaked, all it will have is a slightly overthick crust ... and there is nothing wrong with that.



## Let cool

Put your bread on a cooling rack, or an oven rack on your countertop that is raised up so air circulates underneath. Now leave it alone to cool. Your bread is full of steam and is, in fact, still cooking. You must let it finish in its own time. If you cut hot bread, it will be steamy, heavy, and doughy. Hot rolls are about the only exception to the leave-it-alone rule, but only if you pull them apart. Don't squash or cut them.



# Look after your bread

Having lovingly produced your handmade bread, it makes sense to treat it properly, whether you are serving it right away or storing it.

## Slicing

Telling you the best way to slice bread may seem totally unnecessary, but I've seen too many people squashing, ripping, and hacking at once-beautiful loaves. You should use a sharp serrated knife and avoid pressing down as you cut. Use a rhythmic sawing action, and the weight of the blade will be enough. Brace the sides of the loaf with your other hand, close to where you are cutting, so it holds its shape.

## Storing

The advice on where to store your bread is anywhere but the fridge. According to food science guru Harold McGee, bread stored in the refrigerator stales as much in 1 day as bread held at 86°F does in 6 days. So store your bread at room temperature, wrapped in paper or in a bread bin, or both. Plastic and foil keep too much moisture in and make the crust soft. Uncovered loaves let too much moisture out. Bread freezes successfully, but it must be well wrapped – in plastic freezer bags this time. After defrosting, your bread will probably benefit from refreshing.

## Refreshing

Day-old bread can be returned (almost) to its former glory with a short stint in the oven. Staling is the rehardening of starch granules that had been softened in the oven. Reheating the bread – to 140°F or above – softens the starch again. You can do this again and again, but each time the crust will dry out a little more and become thicker and harder. You will not be able to refresh bread after more than a couple of days of staling, though. It will have lost too much moisture. But all is not lost – you just need some ideas for using [LEFTOVER BREAD](#).

To refresh bread, I suggest a moderate oven, preheated to about 325°F: allow 5 to 10 minutes for rolls, and 15 to 20 minutes for loaves.

## Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	POSSIBLE REASONS
Heavy bread, with a dense, cakey texture	Low-gluten flour Underkneaded
Heavy bread with a solid, rubbery texture	Underproofed
Solid, rubbery bread with large air holes at the top ("flying crust")	Underproofed
Flat, "tired" shape	Low-gluten flour Underkneaded Initial oven temperature too low Loaf not shaped tightly enough Dough not supported enough during proofing
Well risen, but uneven shape	Overproofed Loaf not shaped tightly enough Dough not supported enough during proofing
Slashes don't open out fully	Low-gluten flour Underkneaded Initial oven temperature too low Loaf not shaped tightly enough Dough not supported during proofing Slashes too deep Slashes cut too crosswise instead of lengthwise (except round loaves)
Soft crust	Underbaked Oven too cool
Hard, thick crust	Overbaked
Doughy texture	Underbaked Sliced while still hot
Coarse, dry, holey texture	Overproofed







The Basic Bread Recipe



**This basic bread recipe** is the most important recipe in the book. As you will gather, it is a condensed version of the previous chapter: Bread Making Step-by-Step. It is the recipe that I hope you will use the most to begin with, as it is your route to making good, everyday bread. The more you make it, the more you will get used to the feel of the dough in your hands and the changes it goes through during the various stages of bread making. You will start to recognize how one day's baking differs from another's. And hopefully, with the help of the previous section, you will start to understand why. Get good at this recipe and you will be much better at all of the others in the book.

In time, I hope it will become the recipe you will use

the least. I expect that you will soon memorize the “baker’s percentage” – the ratio of one ingredient to another – so that you no longer need to look it up. I hope the method will become so familiar that you can fit it into your daily life without even thinking about it. And I’d like to think that, before long, you will never need to look at these pages again.

Once you are comfortable with the basic principles of flour, water, yeast, and salt and the effects of different liquids, and once you understand the boundless fun you can have with the addition of a few grains, seeds, and spices, I hope you will discover your own favorites. By all means go wild with your experiments (after all, you don’t know until you try), but please remember one thing: bread is beautiful all by itself. As Robert Browning wrote:

*If thou tastest a crust of bread, thou tastest all the stars and all the heavens.*

So there you go ... Now you know what stars taste like.

### **Ingredients for bread making**

My basic bread recipe is infinitely adaptable. Simply choose one or more options from the ingredients listed below (or add your own), and slot them into the **INGREDIENTS LIST**, in place of the *italics*.

**ESSENTIAL****CHOICES***Flour*

White bread flour, whole-wheat bread flour, brown bread flour, 00, malted grain, whole-grain spelt, white spelt, rye, Kamut

*Yeast*

Instant yeast

*Salt*

Fine sea salt

*Liquid (warm)*

Water, milk, yogurt, apple juice, cider, beer;  
1 tablespoon of honey can be added to any of these

**OPTIONAL***Fat*

Oils, such as sunflower, vegetable, corn, canola, hempseed, olive, peanut, or any other nut oils; or melted hard fats, such as butter or lard

*Old dough/starter*

A piece of old dough (see below) or a ladleful of sourdough starter (see below)

*Extras*

Flakes, meal, or flour of oats, barley, rye, millet, buckwheat, corn, chickpeas, rice, or semolina; seeds, such as pumpkin, sunflower, flax, poppy, sesame, fennel, caraway, cumin, coriander, or alfalfa; chopped nuts, such as hazelnuts, walnuts, or any other nuts; dried fruit, such as raisins, dried apricots, or chopped dates

*Coating*

Rye or any other flour; anything on the extras list except nuts and dried fruit; plus about 1 scant cup of milk or water, if coating with anything other than flour (to help it stick)

MORE INFORMATION ON USING A PIECE OF OLD DOUGH.

MORE INFORMATION ON USING SOURDOUGH STARTER.

## The basic bread recipe

This is my simplified bread recipe, which can be adapted to create a host of different breads (SEE CHART). You will find more detail on the essential stages (highlighted in bold below) in the previous chapter. To begin, you need to measure the ingredients.

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

### Essential

8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) *flour*

1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast

4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt

2½ cups *liquid* (warm)

### Optional

2 handfuls of *extras*

A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter

About 1 tablespoon (a good slug) of *fat*

2 handfuls of *coating*

Scant 1 cup milk or water (if coating with anything other than flour) First, **mix the dough**. This is the one-stage method; you can adapt it for other methods. Combine the *flour*, yeast, and salt in a large mixing bowl. Add smaller *extras* if you are using them (save nuts and dried fruit for after kneading). Add the *liquid* and, with one hand, mix to a rough dough. Add a piece of old dough or the starter if you are using one. Add the *fat* if you are including it and mix it all together. Adjust the consistency if you need to, with a little more flour or water (or your chosen liquid), to make a soft, easily kneadable, sticky dough. Turn the dough out onto a work surface and clean your hands.

**Knead the dough** until it is as smooth and satiny as you can make it – as a rough guide, this will take about 10 minutes. If you are using larger *extras*, like nuts and fruit, stretch the dough out on the work surface, scatter the ingredients over the dough, then fold, roll, and knead briefly, to disperse them.

**Shape the dough into a round** once you have finished kneading. Then oil or flour the surface and put the dough into the wiped-out mixing bowl. Put the bowl in a trash bag and **let ferment** and rise until doubled in size. This could be anywhere between 45 minutes and 1½ hours – or longer still, if the dough is cold.

**Deflate the dough** by tipping it onto the work surface

and pressing all over with your fingertips. Then form it into a round. If you like, **let rise again** up to four times. This will improve the texture and flavor.

Now, **prepare for baking**. Turn on the oven to 500°F or its highest setting, put your baking stone or baking sheet in position, and remove any unwanted racks. Put the roasting pan in the bottom if you are using it for steam (in which case, put the kettle on). Get your water spray bottle ready if you have one, your serrated knife if using, a hot pad, and your peel if you are using a baking stone. Clear the area around the oven.

**Divide the dough** into as many pieces as you wish (I suggest 2 large or 3 small loaves, or a dozen rolls). Shape these into rounds and let them rest, covered, for 10 to 15 minutes.

**Shape the loaves** as you wish, and **coat the outside** with your chosen *coating*. Transfer the loaves to well-floured wooden boards, linen cloths, tea towels, or proofing baskets and lay a plastic bag over the whole batch, to keep it from drying out. **Let proof**, checking often by giving gentle squeezes, until the loaves have almost doubled in size.

**Transfer the loaves for baking** to the hot baking sheet (removed from the oven), or one at a time to the peel. **Slash the tops**, if you wish, with the serrated knife, and



before you **bake the bread**, spray it all over with water if you can. If using steam, bring the boiling teakettle to the oven. Put the pan in the oven, or slide each loaf onto the stone, pour some boiling water into the roasting pan, if using, and close the door as quickly as you can.

After about 10 minutes, turn down the heat to 400°F if the crust still looks very pale; 350°F if the crust is noticeably browning; or 325°F if the crust seems to be browning quickly. Bake until the loaves are well browned and crusty and feel hollow when you tap them: in total, 10 to 20 minutes for rolls; 30 to 40 minutes for small loaves; or 40 to 50 minutes for large loaves. If in doubt, bake for a few minutes longer.

**Let cool** on a wire rack, or anything similar that allows air underneath. Bread for tearing can be served warm, but bread for slicing must be cooled completely.

**Look after your bread** and enjoy it. After all, you have put a lot of work into it. And don't waste a crumb.

**P.S.** Remember that timing in the recipe relates to convection ovens. If using a conventional electric or gas oven, increase the temperature by 25°F. Use an oven thermometer to check the accuracy of your oven.

# Variations on the basic bread recipe

There is no end to the possibilities, of course, but to get you going, here are a few combinations of my own, including my favorite: **MALTED AND SEEDED LOAF**.

## Malted grain bread

There is something special about malted flour. I don't know what it is, but like candlelight or a soft-focus lens, it is flattering - the Don Juan of home baking. As Elizabeth David wrote in her excellent *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*, "Homemade granary bread is very good-tempered, exceptionally easy to mix and bake. It has so much to recommend it, especially to beginners in bread-making." I couldn't agree more.

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) **MALTED GRAIN FLOUR**

1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast

4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt

2½ cups warm water

About 1 tablespoon melted butter

**A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)**

**No extras**

**2 handfuls of rye flour, for coating**

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

## **White bread**

**With full-flavored whole-grain breads, you can get away with a loaf that is firm or dense. However, if white bread isn't soft, light, and crusty, it is pretty disappointing. It is far harder to make good white bread than any other kind of bread, so don't feel downhearted if it takes you a while to get it right. Adding milk or, better still, yogurt, makes a softer, richer crumb.**

***Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls***

**8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) white bread flour**

**1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast**

**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**

**2½ cups warm water (or half water, half milk or yogurt)**

About 1 tablespoon sunflower oil

A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter  
(optional)

No extras

2 handfuls of white bread flour, for coating

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

## Spelt bread

Due to its comparatively low gluten content, spelt bread is often considered to be rather dense and heavy. That's because it often is, but it shouldn't be. Spelt dough just needs to be treated properly. I reckon there are two secrets: a little more kneading than normal – an extra 5 minutes or so – and proofing in baskets to hold the loaves up (or make small loaves if you do not have any baskets). It is very satisfying to make bread from the same grain the Romans baked with.

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) whole-grain spelt flour

1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast

4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt

**2½ cups warm water**

**About 1 tablespoon sunflower oil**

**A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)**

**No extras**

**2 handfuls of spelt flour, for coating**

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

## **Oaty whole-wheat**

**This bread is coated in three grades of oats for a really interesting texture and a beautiful look. The pale oats contrast strikingly with the wonderful chestnut-colored crust. It is a perfect example of how bread should taste.**

***Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls***

**8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) whole-wheat bread flour**

**1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast**

**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**

**2½ cups warm water**

About 1 tablespoon sunflower oil

A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)

No extras

2 handfuls of coarsely ground oats, medium-ground oats, and oat flakes, plus a scant 1 cup milk, for coating

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

## Malted and seeded loaf

**I can't stop making this at the moment. Everyone at River Cottage is going mad for it. Go a little easier on the fennel, as they are the most strongly flavored of the seeds.**

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) [MALTED GRAIN FLOUR](#)

1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast

4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt

2½ cups warm water

About 1 tablespoon sunflower oil

**A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)**

**2 handfuls of extras: a mix of sunflower, pumpkin, sesame, poppy, flaxseed, and a few fennel seeds**

**2 extra handfuls of the above seed mix, plus a scant 1 cup milk or water, for coating**

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

## Breakfast rolls

**You could get up before the birds to make rolls in time for everyone else's breakfast, or you could bake them ahead and freeze them in batches. Simply grab a batch out of the freezer, give them about 15 minutes in a 350°F oven, rub a bit of flour in your hair, and pretend you've been up half the night. Much better ... and it should get you out of the washing up.**

***Makes 12 rolls***

**8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) [BROWN BREAD FLOWER](#)**

**1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast**

**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**

**2½ cups warm milk**

About 1 tablespoon melted butter

A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter  
(optional)

No extras

2 handfuls of white (or brown) flour, for coating

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

## Festival bread

As a celebration of the inaugural River Cottage Festival, we thought we'd have a bit of fun. So, from a choice of five or six different flours and a couple of dozen other ingredients, around sixty guests, my cohost Steven, and I came up with this unlikely recipe – through nominating, voting, and a little cajoling. The alfalfa seeds got in on novelty rather than merit. Steven was the only voice in favor of poppy seeds, so we put one in ... to keep him happy.

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) whole-grain spelt flour

1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast

4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt

1¼ cups warm water



**1¼ cups warm cider**

**1 tablespoon honey**

**1 tablespoon canola oil**

**A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)**

**2 handfuls of extras: a mix of barley flakes, oat flakes, golden raisins, chopped dried apricots, chopped hazelnuts, alfalfa seeds, and a poppy seed**

**2 handfuls of spelt flour, for coating**

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

## Monastery bread

If you prefer bread that is soft, airy, and light as a feather, skip this one. If, however, you are of wholesome and earthy ilk, make it. But be warned: this one hurts. The dough is solid and uncooperative when it comes to kneading. You will notice the ample quantity of extras in the form of rolled oats; this bread is all about oats. I like it sliced thinly, with butter or cheese, or honey ... and a flagon of mead. Sitting in the refectory, after vespers, might be just the place to enjoy it.

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) **BROWN BREAD FLOUR**

1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast

4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt

2½ cups warm water

1 tablespoon honey

About 1 tablespoon melted butter

A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)

6 handfuls of extras: rolled oats

2 handfuls of rye flour, for coating

Follow **THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD**.

## Hazelnut cornmeal bread

This bread is sweet and delicious. The cornmeal gives a pleasing, slightly cakey texture, along with an alluring undertone of sunshine. The honey, nuts, and apple juice make it a natural accompaniment to cheese. As you are shaping the bread, you will find that bits escape everywhere. This is the nature of nuts in bread – and this is why you should only add them at the end

**of kneading.**

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

**6½ cups (1 pound, 12 ounces/800g) whole-wheat bread flour**

**1½ cups plus 2 tablespoons (7ounces/200g) cornmeal**

**1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast**

**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**

**1¼ cups warm water**

**1¼ cups warm apple juice**

**1 tablespoon honey**

**About 1 tablespoon melted butter**

**A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)**

**2 handfuls of extras: chopped hazelnuts**

**2 handfuls of whole-wheat flour, for coating**

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).

**Empty-the-shelf bread**

**Peasants of old would often bulk out their bread with**

whatever they could lay their hands on: oats, millet, bonemeal, even sawdust. I felt a little peasantry recently as I was clearing out my kitchen cupboards and found myself with various near-empty packages of flour, meal, and seeds that needed using up. Feel free to adapt this recipe to use whatever you have around ... within reason, of course. Empty-the-cereal-box bread would be interesting; empty-the-Hoover-bag bread ... perhaps rather less so.

*Makes 2 large or 3 small loaves, or 12 rolls*

**8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) whole-wheat bread flour, or a mixture of bag-ends**

**1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast**

**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**

**2½ cups warm water**

**About 1 tablespoon fat (whatever needs using up)**

**A piece of old dough, or a ladleful of sourdough starter (optional)**

**2 handfuls of extras: a mix of any or all of wheat germ, bran, oat flakes or coarsely ground oats, millet flakes, barley flakes, seeds (sunflower, poppy, pumpkin, flaxseed, or sesame)**

**2 extra handfuls of these extras, plus a scant 1 cup water, for coating**

Follow [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE METHOD](#).





## Beyond the Basic Loaf

If you skipped [Bread Making Step-by-Step](#), you really need to go back and unskip it. You will be much better at all of the breads in this chapter if you do. Some are more difficult than others.

Ciabatta, for example, is tricky, to say the least. I suggest you don't attempt it until you are a reasonably proficient baker, or it will make you feel disheartened. The dough you make it with is wet ... impossibly wet. It has to be this way to create the big air holes and the classic irregular, slightly saggy shape, supposedly mimicking the carpet

slipper that gives it its name.

Focaccia, on the other hand, is quite forgiving – perfect for less experienced bakers. Because it is shallow and supported by a rimmed baking sheet, the strength and structure of the dough are not so critical; it can be underkneaded or overproofed, and you will still end up with bread you can be proud of.

I also want to introduce you to the delights of traditional English muffins, real bagels, and proper pizza ... This chapter is all about expanding your repertoire of bread doughs. Dive in and have fun.

## Beyond the basic loaf

- Focaccia
- Ciabatta
- Breadsticks
- Brioche
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Reminder: Oven timings in the recipes relate to convection ovens. If using a conventional electric or gas oven, increase the temperature by 25°F. Use an oven thermometer to check the accuracy of your oven.





# Focaccia

Focaccia is excellent sharing bread for serving with supper and is really easy to make. You can certainly leave out the rosemary, and you don't have to sprinkle the top with salt, though it is authentic. You could expand this recipe and experiment as I have often done, mixing various herbs and other flavorings into the actual dough, though I think you'd have to ask an Italian if you can still call it focaccia. You could use a stand mixer to knead this soft dough.

*Makes 1 focaccia*

4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) white bread flour

1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast

2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt

1⅓ cups warm water

About 1 tablespoon olive oil, plus extra for coating

## To finish

A generous drizzle of olive oil

A sprinkle of flaky sea salt

A couple of rosemary sprigs, leaves stripped and finely chopped

To knead by hand: Mix together the flour, yeast, salt, and water in a bowl to form a sticky dough. Add the oil, mix it in, then turn the dough out onto a clean work surface. Knead until smooth and silky, about 10 minutes.

Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add the flour, yeast, salt, and water to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed until evenly combined, then add the oil and mix for about 10 minutes, until smooth and silky.

**SHAPE THE DOUGH INTO A ROUND** and coat with a little extra oil. Let rise in a clean bowl, covered with a plastic bag. When it has doubled in size, tip it onto the work surface and press into a rough rectangle. Place in a lightly oiled shallow baking pan, measuring about 10 by 14 inches. Press the dough in with your fingers, right into the corners. Let rise, covered, for about 30 minutes.

Preheat your oven to 500°F, or as high as it will go. When the bread looks puffed up and airy, use your fingertips to poke deep holes across the whole surface, almost to the bottom. Drizzle the top generously (but not swimmingly) with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and rosemary. Bake for about 10 minutes, then turn down the oven to about 400°F and bake for a further 10 minutes.

Focaccia is best eaten warm, but not hot; let cool on a wire rack for about 10 minutes before serving, or let cool completely.

# Ciabatta

This bread is pretty special. I love the flavor from the olive oil, the really big air holes, and the roughness of the semolina-coated crust. I highly recommend a baking stone in your oven for this bread. It cannot hold its own weight, and the instant fierce heat from beneath gives an essential lift. If you use a baking stone, you will, of course, need a peel, or a rimless baking sheet, for sliding the bread onto it. You will notice the salt content is slightly higher than usual; this takes into account the large amount of extra semolina flour you will need to use later, for shaping and coating. A stand mixer would be useful for kneading this very wet dough.

*Makes 6 small loaves*

6 cups (1 pound, 10 ounces/750g) 00 flour or white bread flour

1½ cups (8.8 ounces/250g) fine semolina, plus up to 3 cups for dusting

1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast

5 teaspoons (0.88 ounce/25g) fine salt

3⅓ cups warm water

A generous tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling

To knead by hand: Mix together the flour, semolina, yeast, salt, and water in a very large bowl, then add the oil. You won't be kneading this in the conventional manner. Instead, form your strongest hand into an "eagle claw" and beat the mixture for about 5 minutes, until smooth.

Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add the flour, semolina, yeast, salt, and water to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed until evenly combined, then add the oil and mix for about 5 minutes.

Put the bowl in a trash bag and let ferment. Every 30 minutes for the next 3 hours, do the following: uncover the bowl, slug in some olive oil, smooth it all over and underneath, then make an attempt to fold the whole thing in two in one direction, then in three in the other (a bit like folding a blanket). The first time this will not really work, but this repeated action over the next 3 hours gives real structure to the gluten, and the dough will become more cohesive and elastic.

Now, prepare yourself. Have ready some linen cloth and dust this, the work surface, the dough, and your hands generously with semolina. Make a big pile of semolina to one side, so it's easy to grab. Now tip the dough out onto the work surface. Dust with more semolina. Divide the dough into 6 pieces, using a dough cutter, a metal spatula, or a knife. Use quick chopping motions, dusting as you go. Everything is sticking to everything, I know. Add more

semolina.

One piece at a time, fold the edges in to make a rough rectangle. Flatten the rectangle, roll up lengthwise, press along the seam to seal, coat in semolina, and lay on the cloth. Stretch it out as you do this, so it is roughly four times as long as it is wide.

Cover your bread with plastic wrap and let rise until doubled in size. Meanwhile, preheat your oven, with your baking stone (or baking sheet) inside, to 500°F, or as high as it will go.

You will probably see big, satisfying blisters all over the loaves – these are your big air pockets. When you are ready to bake, flip the loaves, one at a time, onto your dusted peel (or straight onto the hot pan), give them a little stretch lengthwise, and slide into the oven. Do all this as fast as you can, to minimize heat loss. Bake at maximum heat for 10 minutes, then at 400°F for about another 15 minutes. Remove from the oven, drizzle with olive oil, then let cool on a wire rack, where everyone can see them.

**P.S.** To make a real Italian-style panino from one of your freshly baked ciabatta, split it lengthwise and layer with a few slices of good air-dried salami; pieces of soft, ripe goat's cheese; 1 sliced fat tomato; and lots of basil leaves.



A little sea salt on the tomatoes would be good, but check the saltiness of the cheese. Add a grinding of black pepper. Close the sandwich and squash down with both hands. Rub the top and bottom with olive oil. Heat a ridged griddle pan and toast your panino, pressing it down often. When nicely charred on the bottom, turn it over and press down again, using a metal spatula now, as the top will be hot. After 10 minutes or so, the cheese will have melted and your panino should be nicely stuck together and ready to eat.

## Breadsticks

**Breadsticks are brilliant. You can make lots in no time at all. Make these if you have friends coming round for drinks. Freeze any dough you don't need now, in batches, and use within 6 months. This is another soft dough, so a stand mixer would be useful for kneading.**

***Makes about 30***

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) white bread flour, plus extra for dusting**

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) all-purpose white flour**

**1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**1⅓ cups warm water**

**A drizzle of sunflower or olive oil, plus extra for coating**

### **To finish**

**Olive (or other) oil, for brushing**

**A sprinkling of any of the following:**

**Flaky sea salt**

**Black pepper**

**Poppy seeds**

**Smoked paprika**

**Chopped rosemary leaves**

**Finely grated Parmesan**

To knead by hand: Mix together the flours, yeast, salt, and water in a bowl to form a sticky dough. Add the oil, mix it in, then turn the dough out onto a clean work surface. Knead until smooth and silky.

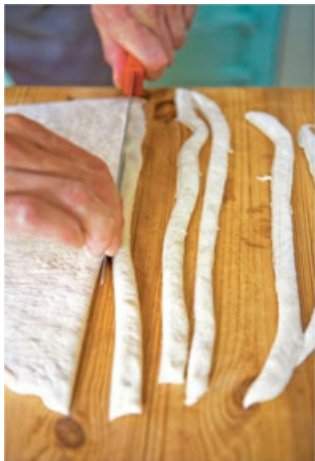
Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add the flours, yeast, salt, and water to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed until combined, then add the oil and mix for about 10 minutes, until smooth and silky.

**SHAPE THE DOUGH INTO A ROUND**, coat with a little extra oil, and place in a clean bowl. Let rise, covered with

a plastic bag, until doubled in size.

Turn the dough out onto the work surface and, using plenty of flour, roll out to between  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch thick. (You may have to do this in batches – it depends on how much room you have.) Dust the top evenly with more flour, then flip the whole thing over and dust the other side.

Cut into strips about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch wide and as long as you like ([PIC 1](#)). If you want to flavor the breadsticks, brush the tops with oil and sprinkle lightly with your chosen flavorings ([PIC 2](#)). Oil your baking sheets and lay the bread strips out on them, curling some if you like ([PIC 3](#)). Let proof for about 30 minutes, then bake at 400°F for about 20 minutes, until golden and just dried out through to the middle. Let cool on a wire rack. Stand in a pitcher or pot ([PIC 4](#)) to serve.



1



2



3



4



# Brioche

This classic French bread is rich and slightly sweet, with a soft, golden crust and a yellow, buttery, cakey crumb. It is widely eaten in France – with coffee for breakfast, as a roll with dinner, or as a base for any number of desserts. At River Cottage, we like to toast brioche and serve it with a smooth chicken liver pâté and a little fruit jelly.

Contrary to popular belief, as bread goes, brioche is pretty straightforward. The dough is very soft to handle though, so kneading in a stand mixer is easier. You can make and bake brioche all in one day, but it benefits from sitting overnight in the fridge – the very soft dough stiffens as it chills, making it easier to shape.

*Makes 2 small loaves*

3 cups plus 2 tablespoons (14.1 ounces/400g) white bread flour, plus extra for dusting

1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast

2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt

6 tablespoons warm milk

2 tablespoons (1 ounce/28g) superfine sugar

7 tablespoons (3.5 ounces/100g) butter, softened

**4 medium free-range eggs, beaten**

### **To glaze**

**1 medium free-range egg**

**2 tablespoons milk**

To knead by hand: Mix together all the dough ingredients in a large bowl to form a dough. Knead for about 10 minutes, until smooth and shiny.

Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add all the dough ingredients to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed until combined and mix for about 10 minutes, until smooth and shiny.

**SHAPE THE DOUGH INTO A ROUND**, place in a bowl, and cover tightly. Leave in the fridge overnight.

The next day, divide the dough into 2 pieces and form into the shape of your choice (see **SHAPE THE LOAVES**). Lightly flour the loaves, lay them on a wooden board or linen cloth, and cover with a plastic bag. Leave them somewhere nice and warm to proof until almost doubled in size; this could take 3 or 4 hours, as the dough is cold.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. For the glaze, beat the egg and milk together. Transfer the risen loaves to a baking sheet



and brush all over with the glaze. Bake for about 10 minutes, then lower the oven setting to 350°F and bake for a further 30 minutes, or until golden brown. Let cool on a wire rack.



# Bagels

Until recently, most of the bagels I had eaten seemed bland, somewhat dry, and rather boring. That was until I came across a bagel recipe in an old Jewish cookbook and was enlightened. Good bagels, like the ones you are about to make, are slightly sweet and curiously chewy, with a soft, shiny, tasty crust. You poach them for a couple of minutes in water before you bake them – the oddest thing you are ever likely to do to a piece of dough.

## *Makes 12*

4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) white bread flour

1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast

2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt

1 cup plus 1 tablespoon warm water

1½ tablespoons (0.7 ounce/20g) superfine sugar

3½ tablespoons vegetable oil, plus extra for coating

## **To finish**

1 medium free-range egg, beaten

Poppy or sesame seeds (optional)

In a large bowl, mix together all of the dough ingredients.

Knead on a clean surface until smooth and elastic. **SHAPE INTO A ROUND**, coat with a little extra oil, and place in a clean bowl. Let rise, covered with a plastic bag.

When the dough has doubled in size, deflate it and divide into 12 pieces. One at a time, roll into a sausage shape about 6 inches long. Wet the ends and press them together to make a ring. Let proof, covered, on a lightly oiled plastic board or metal baking sheet (not floured cloths or boards).

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Lightly oil a couple of baking sheets. In a wide pan, bring about 4 inches of water to a boil.

When the bagels have roughly doubled in size, they are ready for poaching. You will need to do this in batches. Turn down the pan of water to a simmer, then slip as many bagels as will fit comfortably into the water (allow room for them to puff up). Cook for 1 minute on each side, then remove and drain on a clean tea towel (not a paper towel, as it will stick).

When they are all poached, lay the bagels on the prepared baking sheets, gently sticking any that uncured in the water back together again. Brush all over with beaten egg, then sprinkle with seeds if you like. Bake for 15 minutes, until the bagels are a uniform, glossy golden brown. Let cool on a wire rack.





## English muffins

An English muffin – split, toasted, and buttered – is my very favorite bread to have with eggs for breakfast. If you own an Aga stove, then lucky you – muffins were made for cooking straight on the top. If not, you will need a couple of heavy-bottomed frying pans (each large enough to hold 4 or 5 muffins). This dough is soft, so you might prefer to use a stand mixer to knead it.

*Makes 9*

**4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) white bread flour, plus extra for dusting**

**1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**1⅓ cups warm water**

**A drizzle of sunflower oil, plus extra for coating**

**A handful of semolina flour, for coating**

To knead by hand: Mix together the flour, yeast, salt, and water in a bowl to form a sticky dough. Add the oil, mix it in, then turn the dough out onto a clean work surface. Knead until smooth and silky.

Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add the

flour, yeast, salt, and water to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed until combined, then add the oil and mix for about 10 minutes, until smooth and silky.

**SHAPE THE DOUGH INTO A ROUND**, coat with a little extra oil, and place in a clean bowl. Let rise, covered with a plastic bag, until doubled in size.

Tip the dough out onto the work surface and press all over to deflate. Divide into 9 pieces, shape each into a round, and flatten to  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch. Dust them all over with semolina flour; this gives a lovely texture to the crust. Let proof on a linen cloth or wooden board, covered with a plastic bag, until doubled in size.

Heat a couple of large, heavy-bottomed frying pans over medium heat. Lay the muffins in the pans and cook for a minute or so, then turn them over gently. Cook slowly for a further 10 minutes, turning every now and then. You may need to adjust the heat if they seem to be coloring too fast, or not fast enough. Alternatively, if you are using an Aga, cook the muffins directly on the warm plate for up to 15 minutes, giving them a quick blast on the hot side at the end, if you think they need it. Let cool on a wire rack.





# Vetkoek

*Vetkoek*, pronounced “fet cook,” is an Afrikaans word meaning “fat cake.” I once knew a guy called Andre, a South African taxidermist, who lived in a tiny travel trailer. He made me four things: a badger tooth necklace, boiled rabbit, coffee so strong you could chew it ... and *vetkoek*. The *vetkoek* were excellent.

## *Makes 12*

4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) white bread flour, plus extra for dusting

1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast

2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt

1¼ cups warm water

At least 4 cups sunflower or vegetable oil, for deep-frying

In a bowl, mix together the flour, yeast, salt, and water. Turn out onto a clean work surface and knead until smooth and silky. **SHAPE INTO A ROUND**, coat with a little extra flour, and place in a clean bowl. Let rise, covered with a plastic bag, until doubled in size.

Divide the risen dough into 12 pieces, shape into rough rounds, and dust lightly with flour. Cover these and let

stand for about 10 minutes, to rise a little.

Heat 2 to 3 inches of oil in a deep, heavy-bottomed pan to 325°F. If you do not have a frying thermometer, check the oil temperature by dropping in a cube of bread; it should turn golden in less than 1 minute. Deep-fry the *vetkoek*, a few at a time, for 3 to 4 minutes on each side. Let them cool a little before eating.



# Flat bread

Restaurants in southwest Turkey serve fantastic bread – steaming hot and cooked to order. It's a bit like pita, but lighter, softer, and as long as your table. You can make similar bread at home, though you may struggle to make it the size of your table. The dough is soft, so use a stand mixer to knead it, if you can.

*Makes about 12*

**4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) all-purpose white flour, plus extra for dusting**

**4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) white bread flour**

**1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast**

**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**

**1⅓ cups warm water**

**1⅓ cups natural yogurt, warmed**

**2 tablespoons good olive oil, plus extra for coating**

To knead by hand: Mix together the flours, yeast, salt, water, and yogurt in a bowl to form a sticky dough. Add the oil, mix it in, then turn the dough out onto a clean work surface. Knead until smooth and silky.

Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add the

flours, yeast, salt, water, and yogurt to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed until combined, then add the oil and mix for about 10 minutes, until smooth and silky.

**SHAPE THE DOUGH INTO A ROUND**, then place in a clean bowl. Let rise, covered with a plastic bag, until doubled in size. Deflate the dough, then if you have time, let rise a second, third, or fourth time (this improves the dough but is not essential).

Tear off pieces the size of small lemons (or any size you like). One at a time, shape into a round, then using plenty of flour, roll out to a  $\frac{1}{8}$ - to  $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch thickness and let rest for 5 minutes or so; this improves the finished bread dramatically.

Meanwhile, put an oven rack about 6 inches below the broiler and set the broiler to maximum. Heat a large, ovenproof heavy-bottomed frying pan over the highest heat. When the pan is superhot, lay the first bread in it. After 1 minute, or possibly less, the bread should be puffy and starting to char on the bottom. Slide the pan under the hot broiler and watch your creation balloon magnificently.

Remove the bread when it starts to char on the top, drizzle with olive oil, and feed your awestruck friends. They will need something to dip the bread into, such as

*TARAMASALATA* or BEET HUMMUS. Repeat to use all the dough.





# Pizza

The best way to bake pizza is in a fiercely hot brick-floored, **WOOD-FIRED OVEN**. The next best way is on a baking stone in a domestic oven. The base won't char as much and it will take longer, but it will still be amazing. If you do not own a baking stone, you can lay pizzas on baking sheets. They will cook more slowly and won't blister, but they'll still taste good. Make the roasted tomato sauce or the garlicky olive oil, and choose as many toppings as you wish.

*Makes at least 8 small pizzas*

2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) white bread flour

2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) all-purpose white flour

1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast

2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt

1⅓ cups warm water

About 1 tablespoon olive oil

A handful of coarse flour (rye, semolina, or polenta),  
for dusting

**For the roasted tomato sauce (optional)**

1 pound, 2 ounces tomatoes

**2 large garlic cloves, peeled and sliced**

**2 tablespoons olive oil**

**Salt and black pepper**

### **For the garlicky olive oil (optional)**

**6 large garlic cloves, peeled and grated**

**6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**

### **Toppings to add before baking**

**A small bowl of grated Parmesan, grated Cheddar, or sliced buffalo mozzarella**

**A ramekin of good salami, chopped dry-cured bacon, air-dried ham, anchovy fillets, thinly sliced cooked artichoke hearts, or wild mushrooms fried gently in olive oil with garlic and thyme**

**A sprinkling of capers, finely chopped rosemary leaves, black pepper, or thinly sliced mild red chiles**

### **Toppings to add after baking**

**A scattering of basil leaves, arugula leaves, chopped parsley, or wild garlic flowers**

**To make the dough by hand: Mix together the flours, yeast, salt, and water in a bowl to form a sticky dough. Add the oil, mix it in, then turn the dough out onto a**

clean work surface. Knead until smooth and silky.

Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add the flours, yeast, salt, and water to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed, then add the oil and mix for about 10 minutes, until smooth and silky.

**SHAPE THE DOUGH INTO A ROUND**, then let rise in a clean bowl, covered with a plastic bag, until doubled in size.

To prepare the roasted tomato sauce, if using, preheat the oven to 350°F. Halve the tomatoes and lay them, cut side up, in a roasting pan. Mix the garlic with the oil, pour over the tomatoes, and shake the pan a little, to distribute the oil. Season with salt and pepper. Roast for 30 to 45 minutes, until the tomatoes are soft and slightly charred. Press through a sieve into a bowl.

Or, for the garlicky olive oil, simply mix the garlic with the oil.

Have your toppings laid out so everyone can make their own selection.

If using a domestic oven, preheat your oven, with your baking stone (or baking sheet) inside, to 500°F, or as high as it will go. Alternatively, have your clay oven raging hot

(750°F or higher) and rake the embers out.

### To shape and bake the pizzas

If using a wood-fired oven or a baking stone in a domestic oven, take a lime-sized piece of your risen dough and roll it out until about ¼ inch thick, keeping it as round as you can. Dust a peel or rimless baking sheet with coarse flour, and lay the dough on it. If you are using a baking sheet, either roll out a lime-sized piece as above, or you could take a larger piece and press it into the tray, to fit.

Think thin and delicate with your toppings, including the cheese, as befits thin, delicate bases. Overloaded pizzas will be hard to handle and will quite probably tear; they will also come out soggy. Try to use only three or four toppings on each pizza. The following combinations work well:

- Garlicky oil, artichokes, Parmesan, and basil

- Garlicky oil, anchovy, capers, and Parmesan
- Roasted tomato sauce, mozzarella, black pepper, and basil (Margherita) • Garlicky oil, chiles, mozzarella, and arugula
- Garlicky oil and rosemary
- Roasted tomato sauce, salami, Parmesan, and parsley
- Fried wild mushrooms with their oil, Parmesan, and parsley (my favorite) Apply the toppings to be added before baking, then either slip the pizza briskly but carefully onto the baking stone (or brick floor), or

transfer the baking sheet to the top shelf of the oven. Bake until the cheese is melted and bubbling; this should take about 1½ minutes in a wood-fired oven, and 7 to 9 minutes in a domestic oven. Remove from the oven and scatter over any leaves or other raw toppings you may be using. Cut your pizza and dig in ... while somebody else bakes the next one.

## Grill breads

Like the [VETKOEK](#), this is not so much a recipe as a different way of cooking bread dough. If you want to make your dough outdoors and have no suitable surface for kneading, you could employ my (no longer) secret “soggy tea towel” technique (described below).

*Makes at least 8*

**4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) white bread flour (or other bread flour of your choice), plus extra for dusting**

**1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**1¼ cups warm water**

**A drizzle of sunflower or other oil**

In a bowl, mix together the flour, yeast, salt, and water.

Drizzle in a little oil and squish the dough together. Turn out onto a clean work surface and knead until smooth and silky. Alternatively, to use the “soggy tea towel” technique, wring the dough between your hands, as if you were wringing a tea towel. Fold it in half every few wrings as it gets too thin, and keep wringing until the dough becomes smooth and springy.

**SHAPE THE DOUGH INTO A ROUND**, coat with a little extra flour, and place in a clean bowl. Let rise, covered with a plastic bag, until doubled in size.

You can be very flexible about proofing. Make the dough in the morning if you like, then keep deflating it through the day until it's time to eat. At this point, tear off pieces of dough and pull and squash them into roughish rounds, as thin as you can get them by hand.

Let rise for about 10 minutes, or until you have space on the grill, then slap them on. How long they will take to cook depends on how thick they are and how hot the grill is, but 3 to 5 minutes on each side (flip once) should be about right – tear one open and check that it's cooked in the middle. Let cool slightly before eating.



You don't have to buy yeast from the shop to make your bread. You can get your own, from the wild. What's more, you don't need any special equipment, local knowledge, or expert tuition. There are dormant yeast spores all around you – in the air, in your fruit bowl, and in that lovely bag of organic flour in your cupboard. As wild foraging goes, it's a bit of a cinch – you don't even need to leave the house, unless, of course, you need to buy that bag of flour. You just need to create an environment in which the yeast spores will become active.

# Sourdough starter

A starter (also known as a *poolish* or *levain*) is a fermenting dough or batter, all or part of which is used to raise a batch of bread. The term *sourdough* broadly applies to bread raised with wild yeasts. Defining characteristics of such breads are a slower fermentation and a distinctly sour (but by no means unpleasant) flavor. Both are the result of high acidity caused by the presence of certain bacteria, among them lactic acid bacteria (the same bacteria used to make yogurt), which colonize the starter along with the yeasts. Making a starter is easy. We know that yeasts need sugar, warmth, and moisture to reproduce. All you need to do is provide these. Here's the recipe, if you can call it that.

## **For the first stage**

1 cup flour

1 cup warm water

## **For the first feeding**

1 cup flour

About 1 cup warm water

## **For each subsequent feeding**

1 cup flour

1 cup cold water





*1. The first signs of fermentation*



## *2. Vigorous fermentation*

### **The first stage**

You really need a plastic or earthenware container with a lid to make your starter in. It should be big enough to allow plenty of room for frothing – at least four times the volume of your initial batter (because you will add more later). You can use any type of flour you like; I have made excellent starters from rye, spelt, and wheat. I recommend that you use whole-grain rather than white flour though; it will ferment sooner – and more vigorously.

There is no need to be precise about the quantities of

flour and water. For the first stage, just use roughly equal volumes of each to make a thick batter and whisk it well – this incorporates more air, and therefore more yeast spores. If you have a stand mixer, 10 minutes at high speed would be ideal. Put the batter into the container, put the lid on, and leave it somewhere fairly warm – a warm kitchen is fine.

## The first feeding

At some point, your starter will begin to ferment. This depends on many factors, such as the flour used, how much you whisked it, which yeasts and bacteria happen to be around, and how warm it is. To give you some idea, a white wheat starter I made at home took 2 full days to puff a couple of little air bubbles to the surface; a whole-grain spelt starter I made at work was frothing rapidly after only a few hours. So, check every 12 hours or so, and when you see the first signs of fermentation ([PIC 1](#)), give your starter its first feeding by whisking in another 1 cup or so of flour and another 1 cup warm water. Replace the lid and leave it again.

Check your starter again after another day (though in reality you will be so fascinated by now that you won't be able to keep away from it). Don't worry if all this takes longer than you expected – it will get there in the end. And when it does, I should warn you about the smell. You will either love it or hate it. It might be sickly sweet or sickly sour, smelling of vinegar, or rotten apples, or brandy, or spoiled milk, perhaps. Breathe in deeply; I want

you to remember this smell.

## Subsequent feedings

Now tip out half of the starter (into a plastic bag or an old milk carton) and discard it. Replace this with another 1 cup flour, and 1 cup cold water this time, and leave it another day, at a fairly cool room temperature now. In fact, find it a permanent home – it may be with you for life, after all. Hereafter, you are into a feeding program, and you need to find one that suits you.

I suggest for the first week at least, while your sourdough starter is getting established, you feed it daily, discarding half and replacing it. Keep smelling it and you'll become aware of the aroma changing, becoming less harsh and more complex as it matures. You will also notice different smells at different stages of fermentation. Without sounding too personal, you should develop a living relationship with your starter. It is very much like keeping a pet. You will get to know when it needs feeding, when it is most active, when it is tired and sluggish, and (sorry about this) when it could do with a good beating (I whip mine up in the stand mixer every couple of weeks – the oxygen does the yeast a lot of good). About a week into your routine of daily feeding, when fermentation is vigorous ([PIC 2](#)) and regular, and the smells have become recognizable and established, you are ready to use your starter.

If you are likely to bake regularly, as we do at River Cottage, keep your starter as it is – as a thick batter, at

room temperature, feeding it daily. But if you will only be using it every couple of weeks or less, you may as well slow the fermentation; then you'll need to feed it less. To do so, you can make it either colder or drier, or both:

- Keep your starter in the fridge and it can go a week without being fed.
- Alternatively, add enough flour to make a stiff dough and you could happily feed it every three or four days. To feed a dough, discard half (or better still, bake with it), make a new flour and water dough the same volume as the discarded part, and knead it into the remaining starter. A dough that is fed like this will still be pretty active. Many bakers keep starters permanently in the form of dough (more usually known as a *levain*), and bake with them daily.
- Or do both: keep it as a dough in the fridge, and you only need to feed it every couple of weeks.

What is important, though, is that your starter is really active when it comes to baking, so at least a couple of days ahead, remove it from the fridge and/or bring it back to a thick batter by adding water, then feed it daily until you bake.

Nurtured this way, your starter will live forever. However, you may get to a stage where you have no room in your life to look after it but you don't want to throw your starter away. It is worth freezing it for the future – well sealed and labeled clearly.

Currently at River Cottage, we have two starters: a wheat one, an offshoot of my own 3-year-old starter; and an older rye starter, given to us by Clive Mellum from Shipton Mill. Clive's batter has been continuously fermenting for 12 years. But at 12, it is still young. Aidan Chapman, an outstanding baker at the Town Mill bakery, tells me his rye starter was first made 30 years ago in Russia. It is the tradition in many communities to hand down starters from one generation to the next. How satisfying it must be to bake with them – a little piece of ancestry in every loaf.

## Making bread with your starter

Sourdough baking is different from conventional bread baking only in that the process takes longer. You should familiarize yourself with the detailed chapter [BREAD MAKING STEP-BY-STEP](#), as the following recipes refer back to it.

## Bread made with wild yeast

- [Sourdough](#)
- [My sourdough](#)
- [Sour rye bread](#)
- [Spelt sourdough](#)
- [Pumpernickel](#)



# Sourdough

This is a simple whole-wheat sourdough, which you can adapt infinitely, in the same way as [THE BASIC BREAD RECIPE](#). I have also given you the [RIVER COTTAGE VARIATION](#).

*Makes 2 or 3 loaves*

For the sponge

4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) whole-wheat bread flour

2½ cups warm water

A ladleful of very active [SOURDOUGH STARTER](#)

For the dough

4¾ cups (1 pound, 5 ounces/600g) whole-wheat bread flour, plus extra for dusting

5 teaspoons (0.88 ounce/25g) fine salt

Before you go to bed, make the sponge. Mix together all the sponge ingredients by hand in a large bowl or plastic container. Beat for a while, squeezing the lumps of flour out as you come across them. Put the container in a plastic bag and leave it somewhere fairly warm until the morning.



The next day, mix in the flour and salt and squash it all together, adding more flour or water as necessary to make a soft, easily kneadable, sticky dough. Turn it out onto a clean work surface and knead for about 10 minutes, until smooth and springy.

Form **THE DOUGH INTO A TIGHT ROUND**, flour it all over, and place in a clean bowl. Cover with a plastic bag and let rise. After 1 hour, tip it out onto your work surface (it may not have risen much at this point). Form it into a tight round again, return to the bowl, cover, and let rise for another hour. Repeat this process once, or even twice more – you will notice the dough becoming increasingly airy.

After the final rising period, tip the dough out onto the work surface and deflate it by pressing all over with your hands. Divide into 2 or 3 pieces, and **SHAPE INTO LOAVES**. Coat with flour, then transfer the loaves to well-floured wooden boards, linen cloths, tea towels, or proofing baskets. Lay a plastic bag over the whole batch, to keep it from drying out, and let proof until almost doubled in size; this could be anywhere from 1 to 4 hours, depending on the temperature of the dough and the vigor of your sourdough starter.

When the loaves are almost ready, turn on the oven to 500°F or its highest setting, put a baking stone or a heavy baking sheet inside, and place a roasting pan on the

bottom shelf. Put the kettle on. Have a water spray bottle, a serrated knife, and a hot pad ready, as well as a peel or rimless baking sheet, if you are using a baking stone. Clear the area around the oven.

When the loaves are ready, transfer them to the hot baking sheet (removed from the oven), or one at a time to the peel. Slash the tops with the serrated knife and spray the bread all over with water. Put the baking sheet into the oven, or slide each loaf onto the baking stone, pour some boiling water into the roasting pan and close the door as quickly as you can.

After about 10 minutes, turn down the heat to 400°F if the crust is still very pale; 350°F if the crust is noticeably browning; or 325°F if the crust seems to be browning quickly. Bake until the loaves are well browned and crusty and feel hollow when you tap them: in total allow 30 to 40 minutes for small loaves; 40 to 50 minutes for large loaves. If in doubt, bake for a few minutes longer. Let cool on a wire rack.

## Variation

To make River Cottage sourdough, use white bread flour rather than whole-wheat bread flour. For the sponge, use 2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) whole-wheat bread flour and 2½ cups (8.8 ounces/250g) rye flour. Add a good slug (a generous tablespoonful) of sunflower oil after you have

formed the dough.





# My sourdough

Deliciously chewy and tangy, with enormous air holes and a fine savory crust, this is one of my favorite breads. The large holes are due to a wetter than usual dough, so you will find it a little trickier to handle. The shaped loaves will be rather saggy and would certainly benefit from the support of a folded-up linen cloth or, better still, proofing baskets. In any case, this sourdough will rise dramatically in the oven and will always end up looking glorious, if occasionally perhaps a little misshapen.

***Makes 2 or 3 loaves***

For the sponge

**2¾ cups warm water**

**4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) white bread flour**

**A ladleful of [SOURDOUGH STARTER](#)**

For the dough

**4¾ cups (1 pound, 5 ounces/600g) white bread flour,  
plus extra for dusting**

**5 teaspoons (0.88 ounce/25g) fine salt**

To finish

## A handful of rye flour

Before you go to bed, make the sponge: Mix together the water, flour, and starter in a bowl. Cover and leave in a fairly warm place overnight.

The next morning, to knead the dough by hand: Mix the flour and salt into the sponge. The dough should be soft and sticky – just kneadable, but rather wetter than a normal dough. You will need some extra flour – for your hands, the dough, and the work surface. It will be quite messy to begin with. Every now and then, clean your hands and scrape the work surface. Use more flour when you need to, but be sparing with it – you don't want to make the dough stiff, or you won't get the big air holes.

Or, to use a stand mixer: Fit the dough hook and add the sponge, flour, and salt to the mixer bowl. Mix on low speed until combined.

When your dough is smooth and satiny, shape it into a nice, **TIGHT ROUND** and place in a bowl. Cover and leave somewhere warm for about 1 hour.

Now lightly flour the dough, tip it out onto the work surface, and press it out flat with your fingertips. Shape into a round again, put it back in its bowl, cover, and leave in a warm place for another hour. Do this twice

more. You will see and feel the dough becoming smoother, shinier, and more airy.

After these 4 hours of rising and deflating, the dough will feel soft and puffy, like an angel's pillow. Sink your hands in and deflate it once more. Divide into 2 or 3 pieces and **SHAPE INTO LOAVES**. Coat with the rye flour and transfer to well-floured wooden boards, linen cloths, tea towels, or proofing baskets.

Lay a plastic bag over the whole batch, to keep it from drying out, and let proof for 2 to 3 hours, or until doubled in size; you will probably notice big air holes developing near the surface. Unlike with other breads, you should err on the side of overproofing; the loaves may end up a little misshapen, but the air holes will be bigger.

When the loaves are almost ready, turn on the oven to 500°F or its highest setting, put a baking stone or a heavy baking sheet inside, and place a roasting pan on the bottom shelf. Put the kettle on. Have a water spray bottle, a serrated knife, and a hot pad ready, as well as a peel or rimless baking sheet, if you are using a baking stone. Clear the area around the oven.

When the loaves are ready, transfer them to the hot baking sheet (removed from the oven), or one at a time to the peel. Slash the tops with the serrated knife. Spray the bread all over with water. Put the baking sheet into the

oven, or slide each loaf onto the baking stone, pour some boiling water into the roasting pan, and close the door as quickly as you can.

After about 10 minutes, turn down the heat to 400°F if the crust is still very pale; 350°F if the crust is noticeably browning; or 325°F if the crust seems to be browning quickly. Bake until the loaves are well browned and crusty and feel hollow when you tap them: in total, allow 30 to 40 minutes for small loaves; 40 to 50 minutes for large loaves. If in doubt, bake for a few minutes longer. Let cool on a wire rack.





# Sour rye bread

Rye makes dense, heavy bread, as it has very few gluten-forming proteins. It is very tasty, though, and well worth making. You could replace some of the flour (perhaps 2 cups) with white bread flour to lighten it if you like, but I love the full flavor of pure rye and, as long as it is sliced thinly, its texture is a pleasure, not a chore. Kneading it is somewhat less satisfying than with high-gluten doughs, in that it doesn't become stretchy, or resilient, or silky. In fact, it doesn't seem to change much at all. This means less work for you, though; 5 minutes should be quite enough. I also suggest shaping the loaves right away, giving them a single, long rise. Rye bread doesn't seem to benefit from the usual longer process of rising and deflating, which mainly serves to develop the structure of high-gluten breads.

## *Makes 2 or 3 loaves*

**10¾ cups (2 pounds, 7 ounces/1.1kg) dark rye flour,  
plus extra for dusting**

**5 teaspoons (0.88 ounce/25g) fine salt**

**2½ cups warm water**

**A ladleful of [SOURDOUGH STARTER](#)**

**A good slug (1 tablespoon) of sunflower oil (optional)**

Combine the flour, salt, water, and starter in a large bowl and mix to form a dough, adding more flour or water if needed to make a soft, easily kneadable dough. Mix in the oil, if using. Turn the dough out onto a clean work surface and knead for about 5 minutes; you'll probably need extra flour, as it will be quite sticky. Divide the dough into 2 or 3 pieces, **SHAPE INTO LOAVES** and dust well with flour.

Let rise somewhere fairly warm, covered; ideally, in well-floured proofing baskets. You can use linen cloths or wooden boards, but as it is so low in gluten, unsupported rye bread tends to spread outward rather than upward, giving you flat loaves. Loaf pans would give higher, though less attractive, loaves. Your dough needs to double in size, which can take anywhere from 1 to 4 hours, depending on the temperature of the dough and the vigor of your starter. When almost ready, place your baking stone or baking sheet in the oven and preheat the oven to 500°F, or as hot as it will go.

When ready to bake, turn your loaves, one at a time, onto a peel and slide them onto the baking stone in the oven; or remove the baking sheet, turn the loaves onto it, and return to the oven. There is no need to slash rye bread. It will hardly rise, so slashes would barely open up anyway, and it is likely to crack attractively in the oven, especially if it has been well floured. Bake at the high temperature for about 10 minutes, then lower the heat to 350°F and bake for a further 20 to 30 minutes. Let cool on a wire

rack.



## Speltz sourdough

Enriched with hempseeds, this sourdough is deeply

flavored, savory, and nutty. As with any bread made with spelt, a little extra kneading and some proofing baskets to hold the shape of the loaves work wonders. I love to eat this bread with hearty winter soups.

***Makes 2 or 3 loaves***

**For the sponge**

**4¼ cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) spelt flour**

**2½ cups warm water**

**A ladleful of [SOURDOUGH STARTER](#)**

**For the dough**

**7 tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) hempseeds**

**5 cups (1 pound, 5 ounces/600g) spelt flour, plus extra for dusting**

**5 teaspoons (0.88 ounce/25g) fine salt**

**A good slug (1 tablespoon) of hempseed oil**

Before you go to bed, beat together all the sponge ingredients in a large bowl, cover, and leave somewhere fairly warm overnight.

In the morning, toast the hempseeds in a dry frying pan over medium heat, tossing them often, for about 2 minutes, until they smell strong and nutty. Grind them,

using a mortar and pestle if you have one; otherwise, use a spice grinder or small blender. I like to leave them quite coarse, for a bit of texture. Add the seeds to the sponge with the flour and salt, mix to form a dough, then incorporate the oil. Use more water or flour as necessary to give a kneadable dough.

Turn the dough out onto a clean work surface and knead for about 10 minutes, until smooth and springy. Form **THE DOUGH INTO A TIGHT ROUND**, flour it all over, and place in a clean bowl. Cover with a plastic bag and let rise. After 1 hour, tip it out onto your work surface (it may not have risen much at this point). Form it into a tight round again, return to the bowl, cover, and let rise for another hour. Repeat this process once, or even twice more – you will notice the dough becoming increasingly airy.

After the final rising period, tip the dough out and deflate it by pressing all over with your hands. Divide into 2 or 3 pieces, and **SHAPE INTO LOAVES**. Coat with flour, then transfer to well-floured wooden boards, linen cloths, tea towels or proofing baskets. Lay a plastic bag over the whole batch, to keep it from drying out, and let proof until almost doubled in size; this could be anywhere from 1 to 4 hours, depending on the temperature of the dough and the vigor of your starter.

When the loaves are almost ready, turn on the oven to

500°F or its highest setting, put a baking stone or a heavy baking sheet inside, and place a roasting pan on the bottom shelf. Put the kettle on. Have a water spray bottle, a serrated knife, and a hot pad ready, as well as a peel or rimless baking sheet, if you are using a baking stone. Clear the area around the oven.

When the loaves are ready, transfer them to the hot baking sheet (removed from the oven), or one at a time to the peel. Slash the tops with the serrated knife. Spray the bread all over with water. Put the baking sheet into the oven, or slide each loaf onto the baking stone, pour some boiling water into the roasting pan, and close the door as quickly as you can.

After about 10 minutes, turn down the heat to 400°F if the crust is still very pale; 350°F if the crust is noticeably browning; or 325°F if the crust seems to be browning quickly. Bake until the loaves are well browned and crusty and feel hollow when you tap them: in total, allow 30 to 40 minutes for small loaves; 40 to 50 minutes for large loaves. If in doubt, bake for a few minutes longer. Let cool on a wire rack.



## Pumpernickel

Pumpernickel originated in the Westphalia region of Germany, invented by bakers as a way of making the



most of the residual heat of their wood-fired ovens once the usual bread had been baked. The recipe includes rye or wheat berries, which you can buy in many health food shops. Please make this once, at least, just for the experience. It is a drawn-out affair, to say the least (more than 2 days from start to finish), but each stage is very simple.

Use a medium cast-iron (Le Creuset—type) casserole dish with a lid, or something similar, for baking this bread. Alternatively, you could use a couple of loaf pans.

### ***Makes 1 loaf***

#### **For the soaker**

**7 ounces (200g) rye bread, or other brown bread, sliced  
(stale is fine)**

**1 cup plus 2 tablespoons (7 ounces/200g) rye berries (or  
wheat berries)**

**Enough cold water to cover**

#### **For the sponge**

**3 cups (10.6 ounces/300g) rye flour**

**1¼ cups warm water**

**About 1 tablespoon [SOURDOUGH STARTER](#)**

#### **For the dough**

**1¼ cups warm water (use the water from the soaker)**  
**2½ cups (8.8 ounces/250g) rye flour**  
**2 cups plus 1 tablespoon (8.8 ounces/250g) rye flakes**  
**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**  
**2½ tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) blackstrap molasses**  
**A little oil**

The evening before baking, make the soaker: Preheat the oven to 400°F and lay the slices of bread on a baking sheet. Bake until they are brown all the way through to the middle – snap one in half to check. Go as dark as you dare without burning. When you are happy, place the bread in a bowl with the rye berries and cover with water. Press the bread down every now and then to get it nice and soggy. In a separate bowl, make the sponge: Beat together the flour, water, and starter until smooth. Cover and leave both at room temperature until the morning.

The next morning, strain the soaker in a sieve set over a bowl, squeezing the bread out and reserving the liquid. Measure 1¼ cups of this liquid (or add water to bring it up to 1¼ cups if need be). Heat in a pan until tepid, then pour into a large mixing bowl and add the bread and rye berries, the sponge, and the rye flour, rye flakes, salt, and molasses. Mix, stickily, until it all comes together. Oil your baking container, then scoop the mixture in, filling no more than half full. Cover with a plastic bag (or lid)

and let double in size – this could take up to 4 hours.

When you are nearly ready to bake, cover tightly (use a double layer of foil if your container doesn't have a lid). Preheat the oven to 400°F. Place the pan on the middle shelf and bake for 1 hour. Turn down the oven to 375°F and bake for another 30 minutes, then at 350°F and 325°F for 30 minutes each. Finally, bake at 300°F for 3 hours, then switch off the oven and leave the pumpernickel inside until morning.

If you are baking your pumpernickel in a clay oven, put the pan in when it is nice and hot, seal up the door and chimney, and let bake until morning.

The next morning, remove the almost black bread from the pan (it may be quite well stuck – running a knife around the sides will help), wrap it in parchment or waxed paper, and let mature at room temperature for a day before eating. Delicious with cheese, cold meats, and smoked fish.



If time is tight, or it's lunchtime and you've forgotten to go shopping, then this is the chapter for you. Yeast-free breads are much easier and far less demanding of your time than the yeasted kind. For most of these recipes, you simply mix everything together and cook it.

There are also a few flat breads in here. These are unleavened, meaning they contain no leavening agent at all. However, *roti*, the staple bread of southern Asia, still manage to puff up impressively all by themselves.

As you become confident with these recipes, you can

adapt them to suit yourself – adding a few herbs, spices, or some dried fruit perhaps. If ever there was a good place to spread your floury wings, it is here. These are such simple, basic breads that before long, making them – and your own variations – will become second nature.

## Bread made without yeast

- Soda bread
- Walnut and honey bread
- Roti
- Tortillas
- Bannocks

Reminder: Oven timings in the recipes relate to convection ovens. If using a conventional electric or gas oven, increase the temperature by 25°F. Use an oven thermometer to check the accuracy of your oven.



# Soda bread

Soda bread is so easy to make. No kneading, no proofing – just mix the ingredients together, shape into rough rounds, and throw them in the oven. Buttermilk is relatively easy to buy, but you can also make this bread with thin yogurt, milk, or water, or any combination of these.

## *Makes 2 loaves*

**4 cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) all-purpose white flour, plus extra for dusting**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**4 teaspoons (0.56 ounce/16g) baking powder**

**1¼ cups buttermilk, thin yogurt, milk, or water**

## **For coating**

**A little flour (rye would be good)**

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Combine the flour, salt, and baking powder in a bowl and mix in the buttermilk or other liquid to make a dough.

Knead briefly, divide into 2 pieces, then shape into rough rounds. Pat to flatten until about 2 inches high, flour the loaves all over, and place on a baking sheet. Now cut a

cross in the top of each loaf, almost through to the bottom, then stab lightly all over.

Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until the bread sounds hollow when tapped on the base, then let cool for a few minutes on a wire rack. Best eaten warm, with butter.

**P.S.** If you have time, try making your own buttermilk, which will also give you fresh butter to spread on your bread. Cream will eventually turn to butter when beaten, but it takes awhile. Using a stand mixer, beat 4 cups of heavy cream until it thickens, then stiffens, then eventually (and very suddenly) separates. When it does, pour it through a fine sieve into a bowl. The liquid in the bowl is buttermilk. The residue in the sieve is butter. Squeeze and squish the butter together, then hold it under cold running water and squeeze it a bit more to rinse off any buttermilk.

## Variation

To make brown soda bread, replace the white flour with whole-wheat and add a good tablespoonful of dark molasses. This makes a sweeter, slightly heavier bread – excellent with a pint of Guinness and an Irish stew.

## Walnut and honey bread



This is a lovely flavored soda bread to serve with cheese. To vary the flavor, you could replace the honey with the same quantity of dried fruit (dates are excellent), and replace half of the water with apple juice.

***Makes 2 loaves***

**9½ tablespoons (7 ounces/200g) honey**

**1⅔ cups (7 ounces/200g) walnuts**

**4¼ cups (1 pound, 2 ounces/500g) all-purpose whole-wheat flour, plus extra for dusting**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**4 teaspoons (0.56 ounce/16g) baking powder**

**1¼ cups water**

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Soften the honey in a pan over low heat. Using a mortar and pestle, crush half of the walnuts very finely, almost to a powder. Crush the other half very coarsely. This gives the ideal combination – lots of flavor from the crushed nuts, and texture from the large pieces.

Combine the flour, salt, baking powder, and walnuts in a bowl. Add the honey and water and mix together until evenly combined. Knead briefly to a firm dough.

Divide the dough into 2 pieces and shape into rough rounds. Flatten to about 2 inches high and cut a deep cross in each, almost through to the base. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until the bread sounds hollow when tapped on the base.

Let the bread cool a little on a wire rack. If you're wondering what to have it with, a lump of Stilton and a ripe juicy pear would be perfect.



# Roti

This is daily bread in India and Nepal, perfect for scooping up stews, curries, and lentils. Once you've grasped the method, you will make *roti* all the time – it is so easy, and the way the bread balloons in the pan will delight and amaze you. If you use whole-wheat flour, as I often do, sieve it to remove the coarser bits; your *roti* will puff up better.

## **Makes 6**

**$\frac{3}{4}$  cup plus 1 tablespoon (3.5 ounces/100g) whole-wheat bread flour, plus extra for dusting**

**A small pinch of salt**

**$\frac{1}{4}$  cup water**

**A large knob of butter (about 1 tablespoon), melted**

Mix together the flour, salt, and water in a bowl and knead between your hands for a couple of minutes, until smooth. Divide the dough into 6 pieces and roll into balls, as round as you can. Place a heavy-bottomed frying pan over medium heat. Using plenty of flour, roll out each ball to a thin circle, about 6 inches across.

When the pan is hot, lay the first *roti* in. After about 30 seconds, you should see a few bubbles. Flip the *roti* over – it should be slightly browned, with the odd dark spot.

Cook on the other side for another 30 seconds; the bubbles should get bigger. Flip again, and the whole thing should puff up. I say should – about one in three of mine don't quite make it. Turn a couple more times, if you want a bit more color, then remove and brush with melted butter.

Keep the *roti* warm, wrapped in a tea towel, while you cook the rest. Serve as soon as they are all ready.



# Tortillas

Perfect for wrapping around any food you like for a portable lunch, tortillas are quick and easy to make. This Mexican flat bread was so called by the Spanish conquistadors because it reminded them of the classic omelets of the same name from their homeland. If your tortilla reminds you of an omelet, throw it away and start again ... It has gone badly wrong.

## *Makes 8*

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) all-purpose white flour, plus extra for dusting**

**1 teaspoon (0.18 ounce/5g) fine salt**

**$\frac{2}{3}$  cup water**

Mix together the ingredients in a bowl to form a rough dough. Knead for a few minutes, until the dough is smooth and no longer sticky. Cover and let rest for about 30 minutes; this relaxes the gluten and makes the dough easier to roll out.

Divide the dough into 8 pieces and shape each piece into a round. Lightly flour the work surface and roll the rounds out thinly to a  $\frac{1}{16}$  - to  $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch thickness. Place a large frying pan over medium heat, and have ready a clean tea towel.

When the pan is hot, lay a tortilla in it and cook for 30 seconds or so, until the underside is patched with dark brown. Flip over and cook for another 30 seconds, then wrap it in the tea towel while you cook the next one. Keep adding the tortillas to the tea towel as you cook them – this holds the steam in as they cool and keeps them soft.

If you are not planning on eating the tortillas right away, wrap them in foil to keep them from drying out. When ready to serve, reheat in a low oven at 275°F, still wrapped in foil, until just warm.

## Variation

Corn tortillas are made in the same way – just substitute cornmeal for the flour. To turn corn tortillas into chips, cut them into wedges. Heat some oil for deep-frying in a suitable pan to 350°F (the temperature at which a cube of bread will turn golden brown in 1 minute). Deep-fry the chips for up to 1 minute, until crispy. Drain on paper towels and serve with a dip or two, such as [BEET HUMMUS](#) or [TARAMASALATA](#).





# Bannocks

This Scottish, oaty, frying-pan bread should be made fast and eaten warm. You can store bannocks and reheat them later, but they are better served right away. I love to eat them in winter, with butter and thick soup. Have the rest of your lunch ready and make the bannocks at the last minute.

## *Makes 2*

**1 cup (4.4 ounces/125g) coarsely [GROUND OATS](#), plus extra for dusting**

**A small pinch of salt**

**A slightly bigger pinch of baking powder**

**About 2 teaspoons melted bacon fat (or lard, butter, or oil), plus a little extra for greasing the pan**

**3 to 4 tablespoons hot water**

Mix together the coarsely ground oats, salt, and baking powder in a bowl and pour in the melted fat, along with enough water to mix to a stiff paste. Place a heavy-bottomed frying pan over medium heat.

Dust your work surface with ground oats and scrape the mixture onto it. Sprinkle with more ground oats and divide the dough into 2 pieces. Roll out each to a round a

little less than  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick. You'll need to work fast, because the dough stiffens as it cools. Cut each round into quarters.

Add a little fat to the hot pan and cook the bannocks one at a time (that is, four quarters together), for a couple of minutes on each side. Eat warm, with butter.



## Buns, Biscuits & Batter Breads

**This collection** of recipes goes beyond a basic flour-and-water dough to include enriched doughs and batter breads. I have also been liberal with the definition of bread here by including a few biscuits, which is entirely for your benefit, of course. Guests will be awestruck when you offer handmade oatcakes and spelt digestives with the port and Stilton, rather than “assorted crackers for cheese” ... with the best ones gone.

Now is the time to try your hand at English teatime classics, such as lardy cake, hot cross buns, and Chelsea

buns. Enriched with eggs and butter (or lard) and enlivened with fruit and spice, these are truly delicious. And everyone should know the pleasure of a homemade doughnut – still hot and buried in sugar. Doughnuts are made in much the same way as bread rolls, up to the point where you deep-fry them, of course.

Croissants are rather more time-consuming and a little tricky, but perhaps not as difficult as you might think. Get it right, and it may well be the proudest moment of your culinary life. But take my advice – do not make croissants if you are in a really hot kitchen, in a hurry, or in a bad mood. They will not work.

The batter breads, which include crumpets and blinis, are all cooked in a frying pan or on a griddle and are relatively easy to make. There is no kneading or concern about perfect rising. In truth, you can wow your friends with little skill or precision on your part. Not that I'm suggesting you lack skill or precision, of course ... I'm just suggesting you save it for the croissants.

## Buns, biscuits & batter breads

- Doughnuts
- Churros
- Croissants
- Lardy cake
- Hot cross buns

- Chelsea buns
- Scones
- River Cottage shortbread
- Spelt digestives
- Poppy and caraway crackers
- Scottish oatcakes
- Crumpets
- Cornbread
- Blinis
- Staffordshire oatcakes
- Socca

Reminder: Oven timings in the recipes relate to convection ovens. If using a conventional electric or gas oven, increase the temperature by 25°F. Use an oven thermometer to check the accuracy of your oven.









**Doughnuts**

This method will give you tangerine-sized doughnuts, but you can make them any size you like – simply adjust the frying time accordingly. Little golf ball—sized doughnuts make a brilliant dessert with something to dip them into – try sieved raspberries and cold custard.

***Makes 20***

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) white bread flour**

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) all-purpose white flour**

**¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons warm milk**

**7 tablespoons (3.5 ounces/100g) unsalted butter,  
softened**

**7 tablespoons (3.5 ounces/100g) superfine sugar, plus  
extra for coating**

**2 medium free-range eggs**

**1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**At least 4 cups sunflower or vegetable oil, for deep-  
frying**

You really need to use a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook for this recipe. Mix by hand if you like, but it will be a rather sticky affair. Put the flours, milk, butter, sugar, eggs, yeast, and salt into the bowl of the mixer and knead

with the dough hook for approximately 10 minutes. Dust the dough with a little flour, turn it out onto a floured surface, and **SHAPE INTO A ROUND**.

Clean and dry the mixing bowl, put the dough back in it, and cover with plastic wrap or a plastic bag. Let rise until it has doubled in size.

Turn the risen dough out onto the work surface, press out all the air, and divide into 20 equal pieces. I find it easiest to weigh them – each piece should be about 1.8 ounces (50g). Roll them into balls and place on a floured cloth or board. Cover with plastic wrap or a plastic bag and let proof until doubled in size.

Heat 2 to 3 inches of oil in a deep, heavy-bottomed saucepan to 350°F; the oil must not fill the pan by more than a third. If you do not have a frying thermometer, check the oil temperature by dropping in a cube of bread; it should turn golden brown in 1 minute. Deep-fry the dough balls in batches for about 5 minutes, turning them over every now and then so they brown evenly.

Remove the doughnuts from the oil with a slotted spoon and drain well on paper towels for 30 seconds. While they are still warm, toss in superfine sugar to coat generously. Keep them warm while you deep-fry the rest, then enjoy as soon as possible.

## Variations

Add any of the following to the mixer along with the other ingredients:

- Finely grated zest of 1 lemon or orange
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract (or use vanilla sugar rather than superfine sugar) • 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon (ideally, freshly ground in a spice mill) You could also flavor the sugar the doughnuts are tossed in with ground cinnamon, ground star anise, or a mix of cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice. Or fill your cooked doughnuts with some runny jam, using a syringe or small piping bag fitted with a thin nozzle.



# Churros

Traditionally eaten for breakfast in Spain, churros are deep-fried and tossed in sugar like doughnuts, but they are made with a thick, nonyeast batter rather than a risen dough. Eat them with coffee or dipped in hot chocolate, as the Spanish do.

*Serves 4*

**2¼ cups plus 2 tablespoons (10.6 ounces/300g) all-purpose white flour**

**1 teaspoon (0.14 ounce/4g) baking powder**

**A good pinch of salt**

**1½ cups plus 1 tablespoon boiling water**

**At least 4 cups sunflower or vegetable oil, for deep-frying**

**Superfine sugar, for coating**

Mix together the flour, baking powder, and salt in a mixing bowl. Add the boiling water and beat with a wooden spoon until smooth. Transfer to a saucepan and cook gently for a couple of minutes, stirring, until the mixture comes away from the side of the pan. Cover and let stand for 30 minutes.

Heat the oil in a suitable deep, heavy-bottomed saucepan

to 350°F; it must be at least 1¼ inches deep but not fill the pan by more than a third. If you do not have a frying thermometer, check the oil temperature by dropping in a cube of bread; it should turn golden brown in 1 minute.

Traditionally, the mixture is piped straight into the oil, and you can do this if you wish, using a piping bag fitted with a 1¼-inch nozzle. You'll need to deep-fry the churros a few at a time. Carefully pipe lengths (as long as you like) straight into the hot oil. Alternatively, drop tablespoonfuls of the mixture into the oil. Fry, turning every now and then, for 3 to 4 minutes, until golden all over.

Remove the churros with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels, then toss them in a bowl of superfine sugar. Serve as soon as possible, while still warm.





# Croissants

I love croissants and everything about them. They take their name, which translates as “crescent,” from their shape, of course. It also means “growing” or “rising,” which fits nicely because they billow beautifully in the oven.

The technique for making croissants is somewhat similar to puff pastry in that a layer of butter is sandwiched in the dough, which is repeatedly rolled and folded to produce hundreds of wafer-thin layers. It is best to start the night before, as you need the dough to be cold when you roll it. If too warm and soft, it ruptures easily, squeezing out butter everywhere.

***Makes 24 to 28***

**8 cups (2 pounds, 3 ounces/1kg) white bread flour, plus extra for dusting**

**4 teaspoons (0.7 ounce/20g) fine salt**

**1⅓ cups warm water**

**1⅓ cups warm milk**

**1 tablespoon (0.35 ounce/10g) instant yeast**

**½ cup plus 2 tablespoons (4.9 ounces/140g) superfine sugar**

**2 cups plus 3 tablespoons (1 pound, 1.6 ounces/500g) unsalted butter**

## For the glaze

**2 medium free-range egg yolks**

**3½ tablespoons milk**

It is best to use a stand mixer for the first stage, as the dough will be soft, sticky, and difficult to knead by hand. So, put all the ingredients, except the butter, into the mixer bowl and fit the dough hook. Knead on low to medium speed until the dough is soft, stretchy, and satiny – about 10 minutes. Put the dough in a decent-sized food-grade plastic bag (it needs room to rise), suck out the air, tie a knot in the bag, and put it in the fridge to rest overnight.

First thing in the morning, get the butter out of the fridge. You need it to warm up a bit so it is workable but not soft. The idea is that the dough and butter have a similar degree of firmness.

As soon as it seems ready, lightly flour the butter, lay it between two sheets of plastic wrap, and tap it out with a rolling pin to a fairly neat square about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch thick. Take your time to get the thickness and shape as even as possible, then put to one side.

Take your dough out of the fridge, flour it, and roll out to a rectangle a little more than twice the size of the butter (allow about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch extra all around). Now lay the butter

on one half, leaving a border, fold the other half over, and press down all the way around to seal the butter in.

Roll the dough away from you until it is twice its original length, then fold the top and bottom edges in by one-sixth. Fold them in again by another sixth, so the folds meet in the middle, then fold one on top of the other.

Give the dough a quarter turn and roll it out again to about the same size as before. Fold the top and bottom edges in to meet at the middle, then fold one on top of the other. Roll this out slightly and seal the edges with the rolling pin.

Put the dough back in the plastic bag and return it to the fridge to rest for an hour or so. (You've given the gluten a good workout and it must relax now, otherwise it will be resistant and uncooperative later.) In the meantime, cut a template from a piece of cardboard (the back of a cereal box or something similar). You want an isosceles triangle measuring 8 inches across the base and 10 inches tall. (The easiest way is to draw an upside-down capital T and join the points, like a cartoon sail.) When your dough has rested, unwrap and roll it out to a neat rectangle a little larger than 55 by 20 inches ([PIC 1](#)). Trim the rectangle to these measurements, leaving perfectly straight edges. Cut the rectangle in half lengthwise, to give two 10-inch wide strips. Using your template as a guide, cut 12 to 14 triangles from each strip ([PIC 2](#)).

Lay each triangle pointing away from you and roll up from the base (PIC 3). Wet the pointed end and seal it. Curl the tips around to form a crescent and pinch them together to hold them in place (PIC 4); or you can leave them straight if you prefer. (At this point you could freeze some if you like. Spread them out on a baking sheet and freeze, then pack into bags. Allow an extra hour for rising when you use them.) Lay your croissants, with the sealed points underneath, on baking sheets lined with greased parchment paper or (better still) silicone mats. Cover with plastic wrap or a trash bag and let rise until doubled in size. As the dough is cold, this could take a couple of hours, or longer.

When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 400°F. Beat together the egg yolks and milk, then gently brush all over the croissants. Bake for about 10 minutes, then lower the setting to 325°F and bake for a further 5 to 10 minutes, until they look beautifully golden. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool slightly, while you make coffee.

**P.S.** If your work surface isn't large enough to roll the dough out to a 55 by 20-inch rectangle, cut the dough in half. Roll out one portion at a time to a rectangle a little bigger than 27½ by 20 inches, then cut into strips as above and cut 6 or 7 triangles from each strip, using your template as a guide.



1



2



3



4



# Lardy cake

Apparently, Northumberland lardy cakes are made with milk and currants, while Hampshire lardy cakes have no fruit at all. I have seen Wiltshire lardy cake made with various combinations of dried fruit and spices. Call it what you will, you can be sure of two things: plenty of lard, but no cake – lardy cake is bread. A footnote in Elizabeth David's *English Bread and Yeast Cookery* makes me smile: "If you cant lay your hands on pure pork lard, don't attempt lardy cakes." Say no more.

*Serves 8*

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) white bread flour, plus extra for dusting**

**$\frac{2}{3}$  cup warm water**

**$1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**1 teaspoon (0.18 ounce/5g) fine salt**

**$\frac{3}{4}$  cup (5.6 ounces/160g) lard**

**$\frac{1}{3}$  cup (1.8 ounces/50g) golden raisins**

**$\frac{1}{3}$  cup (1.8 ounces/50g) currants**

**$\frac{1}{3}$  cup (1.8 ounces/50g) chopped candied citrus peel**

**$3\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) superfine sugar**

**1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (ideally, freshly ground**



**in a spice mill)**

Combine the flour, water, yeast, and salt in a bowl and mix to a soft dough. Melt 2 teaspoons of the lard and incorporate it into the dough, then turn out onto a floured surface and knead until smooth and elastic. Put into a clean bowl, cover, and let rise until doubled in size.

In a separate bowl, toss the dried fruit and candied peel with the sugar and cinnamon. Cut the rest of the lard into small dice.

Tip the dough out onto a clean work surface and press all over with your fingertips to deflate. Roll out to a rectangle about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch thick. Scatter half of the dried fruit and lard pieces over the dough, then roll up from a short side to enclose the filling.

Give the dough a quarter turn and roll it out again to a rectangle, as before. Scatter the remaining fruit and lard pieces over the dough and roll up again. Roll out the dough to an 8-inch square and place in a greased deep 8-inch square baking pan. Let rise for another 30 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Bake the lardy cake for 30 to 40 minutes, until well risen and golden brown. Let cool slightly in the pan for 10 to 15 minutes, then invert onto

a wire rack to finish cooling. Placing the lardy cake upside down will allow the melted lard to be reabsorbed into the dough as it cools. Serve warm or cold, cut into slices.



# Hot cross buns

Whether they're freshly baked or toasted, I love these buns and bake a batch whenever it takes my fancy, leaving off the crosses if it isn't Easter. I also like to vary the dried fruit – a mix of chopped dates, cranberries, apricots, and cherries is particularly good.

*Makes 8*

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) white bread flour, plus extra for dusting**

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) all-purpose white flour**

**½ cup warm water**

**½ cup warm milk**

**1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**3½ tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) superfine sugar**

**1 medium free-range egg**

**3½ tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) butter**

**⅔ cup (3.5 ounces/100g) raisins, currants, or golden raisins (or a mixture)**

**Finely grated zest of ½ orange**

**¼ heaping teaspoon each of cinnamon, nutmeg, and**

## **allspice**

### **For the crosses**

**6 tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) all-purpose white flour**

**7 tablespoons water**

### **To finish**

**1 tablespoon apricot (or other) jam, sieved**

**1 tablespoon water**

If you have a stand mixer, combine the flours, water, milk, yeast, salt, and sugar in the bowl and fit the dough hook. Add the egg and butter and mix to a sticky dough. Add the dried fruit, orange zest, and spices and knead on low speed until silky and smooth. (You can do this by hand, but it will be sticky to handle.) Cover the dough and let rise in a warm place for about 1 hour, until doubled in size.

Deflate the risen dough and divide into 8 equal pieces. **SHAPE INTO ROUNDS** and dust with flour. Place on a floured board, cover with plastic wrap or linen, and let proof for about 30 minutes, until roughly doubled in size.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. To make the crosses, whisk together the flour and water until smooth, then transfer to a pastry bag and snip off the end to make a fine hole (or

use a plastic food bag with a corner snipped off, as I do). Transfer the risen buns to a baking sheet and pipe a cross on top of each one, then bake for 15 to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, melt the jam with the water in a pan. Brush over the buns to glaze as you take them from the oven. Transfer to a wire rack to cool. Serve warm, cold, or toasted.



# Chelsea buns

In the Victorian era, Chelsea buns were sweet rolls made with dried fruit – similar to hot cross buns but without the cross. However, these are Chelsea buns as we know them – sticky, curranty, and swirly.

## *Makes 9*

**4 $\frac{1}{3}$  cups (1 pound, 3 ounces/550g) white bread flour,  
plus extra for dusting**

**3 $\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) superfine sugar or  
vanilla sugar**

**1 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**$\frac{2}{3}$  cup warm milk**

**1 cup (7.9 ounces/225g) butter, melted**

**1 medium free-range egg**

## **For the filling**

**5 teaspoons (0.88 ounce/25g) butter, melted**

**7 tablespoons (3.5 ounce/100g) superfine sugar**

**1 $\frac{1}{4}$  cups (7 ounces/200g) currants**

## **For the glaze**



**3½ tablespoons milk**

**3½ tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) superfine sugar**

In a bowl, combine the flour, sugar, yeast, and salt. Add the milk, butter, and egg and mix to a sticky dough. Turn out onto a floured surface and knead until smooth and silky. Return to the cleaned bowl, cover, and let rise for about 1 hour, until doubled in size.

Brush the bottom and sides of a deep 12-inch square baking pan with a little of the melted butter (for the filling) and coat with a little of the sugar, shaking out the excess.

Tip the dough out onto a floured surface, dust with flour, and roll out to a rectangle, about 24 by 16 inches. Brush the melted butter all over the dough to the edges, leaving a ¾-inch margin free across the top (long) edge. Sprinkle with the sugar and scatter the currants evenly on top, right to the edges, but leaving the top margin clear.

Press the currants into the dough, then, starting from the edge closest to you, roll up the dough to enclose the filling and form a long sausage. Moisten the margin at the top with water and press to seal. Cut the roll into 9 equal pieces. Lay the rolls flat and press with your hand to flatten slightly, until no more than 1¼ inches high. Arrange in rows of 3 in the baking pan – they should just

touch each other.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Let the buns proof for about 30 minutes, until doubled in size again. Sprinkle a little of the sugar for the glaze over them and bake for about 20 minutes, until golden brown.

Warm the milk and the remaining sugar together in a pan until dissolved, then brush over the buns to glaze when you take them out of the oven. Best served warm.



# Scones

Of course you can put what you like on your scones, but I'll usually opt for a traditional cream tea of jam and clotted cream. Cream tea etiquette is fiercely disputed in the West Country. The Cornish put strawberry jam on their scones first, then the clotted cream; in Devon and Dorset, it is customary to do it the other way around. Personally, I prefer raspberry jam and I always put jam on first, even though I live on the Devon-Dorset border.

*Makes about 8*

**2 $\frac{1}{4}$  cups plus 2 tablespoons (10.6 ounces/300g) all-purpose white flour, plus extra for dusting**

**2 teaspoons (0.28 ounce/8g) baking powder**

**A good pinch of salt**

**$\frac{1}{3}$  cup (2.6 ounces/75g) unsalted butter, at cool room temperature (neither fridge-cold nor soft), cut into cubes**

**3 $\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) superfine sugar**

**1 medium free-range egg**

**1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract**

**$\frac{1}{2}$  cup heavy cream**

**A little milk, for brushing**

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Using a food processor if you have one, whiz together the flour, baking powder, salt, butter, and sugar until the mixture resembles fine bread crumbs. (Otherwise, sift the flour, salt, and baking powder into a mixing bowl, rub in the butter with your fingers, then stir in the sugar.) In a separate bowl, beat together the egg, vanilla, and cream, then add to the flour mixture and bring together with your hands to form a soft dough.

Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and knead very briefly, for 10 seconds or so, to make it a little smoother. Now, using a little more flour, pat or gently roll out to a thickness of about 1½ inches.

Using a 2½-inch biscuit cutter (or a larger one, if you like), cut out about 8 disks of dough – pressing the cutter straight down, rather than twisting it, as this gives the scones a better chance of rising straight up.

Lay the disks on a lightly greased baking sheet, brush the tops with milk, and bake for about 15 minutes, or a little longer if the scones are large. To check that they are cooked, insert a wooden toothpick into the middle; it should come out clean. Transfer to a wire rack to cool for a few minutes, then serve warm.



# River Cottage shortbread

This is quite different from a traditional thick shortbread. We cream the butter with the sugar first, which makes the mixture really light. We also add egg yolks and roll out the dough thinly – to make rich, delicate biscuits.

*Makes about 24*

**¾ cup (6.2 ounces/175g) butter, softened**

**6½ tablespoons (3.2 ounces/90g) superfine sugar, plus extra for sprinkling**

**A generous pinch of salt**

**2 medium free-range egg yolks**

**1½ cups plus 2 tablespoons (7 ounces/200g) all-purpose white flour, plus extra for dusting**

## Flavorings (optional)

**One (or more) of the following:**

**1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract**

**Grated zest of 1 lemon or orange**

**1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (ideally, freshly ground)**

In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle beater, or using a handheld electric mixer, cream together the butter and sugar on medium-high speed until very pale (almost white) and fluffy, scraping the sides down regularly with a spatula.

Lower the speed to medium and add the salt, egg yolks, and any extra flavorings. Beat for another 30 seconds, then switch off the machine. Fold the flour into the mixture using a spatula. You will have a very soft, sticky dough.

With floured hands, scrape the dough out of the bowl onto a floured surface. Pat it into a wide, flat disk, using more flour if you need to, then wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for about 1 hour, as the dough needs to firm up before you can roll it out.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Unwrap the dough and roll it out on a floured surface to a thickness of about  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch. Using a 2½-inch biscuit cutter, cut out about 24 rounds. With an offset spatula, carefully transfer them to a nonstick baking sheet, or one lined with parchment paper.

Bake for 7 to 10 minutes, until just golden around the edges but pale on top, checking every minute after 7 minutes. The shortbread biscuits will still be soft; they firm up on cooling. As you remove them from the oven, sprinkle generously all over with superfine sugar. Leave



on the baking sheet for a minute or two, then carefully transfer to a wire rack to cool. These delicate biscuits will keep for a couple of days in an airtight container.



# Spelt digestives

We often make these at River Cottage, usually to serve with cheese, but they are also delicious with cold meats, particularly pâtés and terrines. We prefer a less sweet biscuit with meats, so we reduce the sugar content slightly. I have given both options here.

*Makes about 40*

**1 cup plus 1½ tablespoons (8.8 ounces/250g) unsalted butter, softened**

**2 cups plus 1 tablespoon (8.8 ounces/250g) spelt flour, plus extra for dusting**

**2 cups plus 1 tablespoon (8.8 ounces/250g) medium-**GROUND OATS****

**⅔ cup (4.4 ounces/125g) brown sugar (or ½ cup for a less sweet biscuit)**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**2 teaspoons (0.28 ounce/8g) baking powder**

**A little milk**

Rub the butter into the spelt flour until it resembles fine bread crumbs; the easiest way to do this is in a food processor, if you have one. Add the medium-ground oats, sugar, salt, and baking powder and mix together until

evenly combined. Add enough milk, a few drops at a time, to bind the mixture and form a slightly sticky dough.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and dust with more flour, then press into a round, flat disk. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes, to rest and firm up a bit. (This dough will keep well in the fridge for a few days, but it will become rock hard, so if it's prepared ahead, you'll need to let it soften out of the fridge before you roll it out.) When ready to cook, preheat the oven to 350°F. Flour the dough well and lay it between two sheets of parchment or waxed paper or plastic wrap. (As the dough is sticky and brittle, this makes it much easier to handle.) Roll it out carefully to a thickness of  $\frac{1}{8}$  to  $\frac{3}{16}$  inch, dusting regularly with flour to keep it from sticking.

Using a  $2\frac{3}{4}$ -inch biscuit cutter, cut out about 40 rounds and lay them on nonstick baking sheets, or ones lined with parchment paper. Bake for 7 to 10 minutes, checking regularly after 7 minutes; the biscuits should be brown around the edges and lightly colored on top. Leave on the baking sheet for a minute or two, then carefully transfer to a wire rack to cool.

**P.S.** These biscuits will keep for several days in an airtight container.



# Poppy and caraway crackers

These crackers are tasty, crispy, and as light as a feather. So light, in fact, that you should switch off the oven fan if you have one – they have a tendency to take off.

*Makes about 25*

**2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) all-purpose white flour, plus extra for dusting**

**½ teaspoon baking powder**

**½ teaspoon poppy seeds**

**½ teaspoon caraway seeds**

**½ teaspoon fine salt**

**2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons olive or sunflower oil**

**7 tablespoons water**

In a bowl, mix together the flour, baking powder, poppy seeds, caraway seeds, and salt, then make a well in the middle and add the oil and water. Gradually mix together until evenly combined and bring together to form a rough dough. Knead briefly, using more flour if you need to; the dough should be soft, but not sticky. Wrap in plastic wrap and let rest in the fridge for 30 minutes or so.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly flour your work

surface, then roll the dough out until about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick. Using a 2-inch biscuit cutter, cut out about 25 rounds, then roll out each round again, in one direction, as thinly as you can. Lay them on baking sheets and bake for up to 10 minutes, but be watchful – it is easy to overcook these crackers. They are ready when they are just showing the first signs of browning, but still predominantly pale.

**P.S.** These crackers don't keep very well once cooked, so if you don't think you need this quantity, it is best to freeze half of the dough.



# Scottish oatcakes

This is one version – and there are many – of the classic Scottish biscuit.

*Makes about 20*

**1 cup plus 3 tablespoons (4.9 ounces/140g)**  
**medium-[GROUND OATS](#), plus extra for dusting**

**1¾ cups (4.9 ounces/140g) quick-cooking oats**

**A little pinch of salt**

**⅓ cup sunflower oil**

**About 2 tablespoons just-boiled water**

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Mix together the medium-ground oats, oats, and salt in a bowl. Add the oil and enough hot water to mix to a firm dough. Pat into a flat disk, cover, and let stand for 10 minutes or so – this makes the dough a little easier to roll.

Dust your work surface and the dough with ground oats and roll out until it is about ¼ inch thick. Using a 2½-inch biscuit cutter, cut out about 20 disks. Place on baking sheets and bake for about 20 minutes, until just browned at the edges. Leave on the baking sheets for about 5 minutes to firm up, then transfer to a wire rack to cool. Either eat right away, with cheese if you like, or



keep for up to a few days in an airtight container.

## Crumpets

Crumpets are an English teatime classic, not for a refined cucumber-sandwich-and-best-china tea, but eaten fireside with a big pot of tea – and very likely butter down your shirt. To make real crumpets, you need metal crumpet rings to hold the batter in while they are cooking. If you don't have suitable metal rings, try the variation for pikelets below.

*Makes about 12*

**3½ cups plus 2 tablespoons (15.9 ounces/450g) all-purpose white flour (approximately)**

**1½ cups warm milk**

**1½ cups warm water (approximately)**

**1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

**1 teaspoon (0.14 ounce/4g) baking powder**

**A little sunflower or vegetable oil**

In a bowl, whisk together the flour, milk, water, and yeast. You will end up with a rather runny batter (the consistency of half-and-half). Cover with a plastic bag and

set aside for at least 1 hour, or up to 4 hours, until it is really bubbly.

When you are ready for tea, heat a large, heavy-bottomed frying pan or flat griddle over medium-high heat. Whisk the salt and baking powder into the batter. Grease your crumpet rings and pan, using a scrunched-up piece of paper towel dipped in oil.

Now I suggest you do a test run. Put one crumpet ring in the pan, fill to just below the top, and see what happens. If the batter is the correct consistency, it should stay contained within the ring and lots of holes should appear on the surface after a minute or two. (If it dribbles out underneath, the batter is too thin, so whisk in a little more flour. If lots of holes don't appear, the batter is probably too thick, so whisk in a little water.) Do another test run if necessary.

After 5 minutes or so, when the surface is just set, flip the crumpet over, ring and all. (If the base is too dark, turn down the heat.) Cook for 2 to 3 minutes, until golden on the other side. Once you have a successful test run, cook your crumpets in batches. Either butter and eat right away, or, let cool on a wire rack for toasting later.

## Variation

To make pikelets, whisk another 6 tablespoons (1.8

ounces/50g) flour into the batter to stiffen it, so you won't need to use crumpet rings. Dollop spoonfuls of this batter into your greased pan and cook for a couple of minutes only on each side.



# Cornbread

Cornbread is delicious, and is one of the defining tastes of the Deep South. It is traditionally made with bacon fat, but butter and lard are both excellent substitutes. Eat it warm with butter, or fry slices in butter or bacon fat. Cornbread would be at home at a barbecue – alongside a sticky rack of ribs and a big salad. Or try it my favorite way (see below).

## *Makes 1*

2 cups (8.8 ounces/250g) cornmeal

2½ teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) baking powder

1 teaspoon (0.18 ounce/5g) fine salt

2 tablespoons bacon fat, butter, or lard

½ cup milk

½ cup yogurt

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Place a medium heavy-bottomed, ovenproof frying pan over medium heat to warm up.

Meanwhile, mix together the cornmeal, baking powder, and salt in a large bowl. Melt 1 tablespoon of the bacon fat or other fat in a small saucepan, then add the milk and yogurt. Warm through, then add to the dry ingredients and

stir it all together.

Melt the remaining 1 tablespoon fat in the frying pan, then immediately pour in the cornmeal mixture. Let it cook for 1 minute, then transfer to the oven and bake for about 20 minutes, until firm and golden. You can eat it right away, or let it cool for awhile if you prefer.

**P.S.** To make my perfect breakfast (for one or two, depending on appetite): wipe out the pan you made the cornbread in and cook 5 or 6 strips of smoked dry-cured bacon until crispy; remove and keep warm. Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  finely diced small onion to the pan with a knob (1 tablespoon) of butter and fry over medium heat until soft and golden. Meanwhile, strip the kernels from a corn cob and cook in boiling water for 2 minutes. Drain and toss with the onions. Season with salt and a good grinding of pepper, and serve with the bacon, cornbread, and maple syrup. To turn breakfast into supper, serve after sundown with a large sip of bourbon.



# Blinis

These traditional Russian pancakes are properly made with buckwheat flour. At River Cottage, we love to make blinis but rarely have buckwheat, so we use a mix of rye and wheat flours. They are totally delicious.

*Makes about 12 (or 50 mini blinis)*

**1 cup milk**

**$\frac{3}{4}$  cup natural yogurt or crème fraîche**

**2 large free-range eggs, separated**

**1 cup (3.5 ounces/100g) rye flour**

**$\frac{3}{4}$  cup (3.5 ounces/100g) white bread flour**

**1 teaspoon (0.18 ounce/5g) fine salt**

**$1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**A little melted butter or sunflower oil, for greasing**

Warm the milk and yogurt or crème fraîche together in a pan until just tepid, then remove from the heat and whisk in the egg yolks.

In a mixing bowl, whisk together the flours, salt, yeast, and the milk mixture until smooth. Cover with plastic wrap and let stand for at least 1 hour to ferment. You can leave it for 3 or 4 hours, if you like.



When ready to cook, heat a large, heavy-bottomed frying pan or flat griddle over medium-high heat. Whisk the egg whites in a separate bowl until stiff, then stir a spoonful into your bubbling batter to loosen it. Gently fold in the rest of the egg whites.

Grease the pan with a scrunched-up piece of paper towel dipped in melted butter or oil. Dollop tablespoonfuls of the batter into the pan – as many as you can fit, but not too close together as they will spread slightly. Cook for a minute or so, then flip over and cook for another minute. Remove and keep warm, wrapped in a cloth, while you cook the rest. Serve hot, with butter or savory toppings.

## Variation

“Mini blinis” – teaspoon-sized dollops that cook in half the time – make excellent party food. Top them with smoked salmon and crème fraîche, or caviar perhaps, or the River Cottage way – with slices of home-cured mackerel and a little dilled yogurt.



# Staffordshire oatcakes

My best friend at university came from a village near Stoke-on-Trent. He loved Staffordshire oatcakes, which we ate for breakfast on Sundays – 3 each, stacked up with a full English breakfast, plus loads of ketchup. They also make a great lunch (2 is more than enough) rolled around cheesy béchamel sauce and diced bacon, with some salad on the side. Make a whole batch and cook as many as you need – the batter keeps well in the fridge or freezer. I've also found that cooked oatcakes can be warmed in the oven or in a pan successfully.

***Makes 10 to 12***

**1¾ cups plus 2 tablespoons (7.9 ounces/225g) whole-wheat flour**

**1¾ cups plus 2 tablespoons (7.9 ounces/225g) finely  
GROUND OATS**

**2 cups plus 2 tablespoons warm water**

**2 cups plus 2 tablespoons warm milk**

**1½ teaspoons (0.18 ounce/5g) instant yeast**

**2 teaspoons (0.35 ounce/10g) fine salt**

In a large bowl, whisk together all the ingredients until smooth. At this stage, the batter will seem too thin, but it

will thicken as the ground oats swell. Cover and let sit for at least 1 hour, until the batter is really bubbly and frothy.

Heat a large, heavy-bottomed frying pan over medium-high heat, then grease it with a scrunched-up piece of paper towel dipped in oil. Give the batter a good whisk, then pour a ladleful into the pan, tipping and swirling the pan so the batter thickly coats the bottom.

Cook for a couple of minutes, during which time the surface will become pocked with holes. Flip over and cook for another minute, then remove from the pan. Wrap in a clean tea towel to keep warm. Cook enough oatcakes for breakfast (or lunch); keep the rest of the batter in the fridge or freeze for later.



# Socca

Made with chickpea flour, this thick pancake from the South of France is summer tearing and sharing food. Serve it outdoors with some good tomatoes, cheese, salad greens, salami, and olives, or a ragù of beans. You could try adding flavors to the pancake batter, too: finely chopped rosemary and black pepper would be excellent. You'll notice the recipe uses equal volumes of flour and water, and the flour is measured only by volume, not weight, for convenience. Use a measuring cup, or a pitcher, or any other container, to measure first the flour, then the water. The quantities are easily adjusted to make the number of pancakes required.

## *Makes 1*

About 7 tablespoons chickpea flour

About 7 tablespoons water

Small pinch of salt

Extra-virgin olive oil, for frying

Pour the flour and water into a mixing bowl. Add the salt, then whisk until most of the lumps are gone.

Heat a slug (1 tablespoon) of olive oil in a small frying pan. When it is hot but not smoking, pour in enough

batter to give a ¼-inch thickness. Cook until it has set, but keep checking the underside.

When it is dark in patches, even very slightly charred, flip the pancake over, trickle a little more oil around the side of the pan, and give it a shake. Cook for another couple of minutes, until the other side is similarly colored. Tear a bit off the side to check that it's cooked through.

Serve the pancake right away, or keep it warm while you cook some more.

**P.S.** You can buy chickpea flour from health food shops, or from Asian food stores, where it may go by the name of *besan* or gram flour.



Using Leftover Bread

**I never throw bread in the trash**, and neither should you – unless, of course, it is moldy, which it shouldn't be if you've stored it properly. Consider these possibilities for your aging loaf:

**Cut the whole bottom crust off** your loaf and use as a plate for a stew. Afterward, eat the plate. It may sound silly, but this was an old English staple, known as a "trencher." A good, thick slice of stale bread in the bottom of a bowl of stew is still an excellent idea.



**Rip bread into big chunks**, keeping the crusts on. Toss them in olive oil and bake until golden for wonderful croutons to drop into soup. You could add some grated cheese as you toss – for a tastier, more stuck-together affair.

**Make a bread sauce** to serve with roasted poultry or game. Remove the crusts, tear the bread into chunks, and soak in just-boiled milk infused with a small onion, a bay leaf, and a few cloves for half an hour. Reheat and season generously with sea salt and freshly ground pepper to serve.

**Rip bread into smaller chunks** to make Spanish *migas*. Fry the bread in lard or bacon fat until crispy, throwing in some diced bacon and sliced onion for extra flavor if you like. Season with salt and pepper, and finish with chopped parsley. Serve topped with a fried egg for the perfect breakfast.

**Make bread crumbs** by processing chunks of bread, a handful at a time, in a food processor to make coarse crumbs. Freeze any bread crumbs you won't use right away. They freeze brilliantly and you'll find endless uses for them: • Use to thicken soups, or sprinkle over dishes to be flashed under the broiler for a crisp topping.

• To coat fish: season fillets of fish, dip into flour, then into beaten egg, then into bread crumbs and pan-fry. (For a thicker, crunchier coat, double-dip them in the

egg and bread crumbs.) • To make “poor man’s Parmesan”: pan-fry bread crumbs in olive oil with a little salt until crisp, drain on paper towels, and scatter over pasta.

**Dry bread crumbs completely** spread out on a baking sheet, in a very low oven or somewhere else warm, then process again until very fine.

- Use to make Scotch eggs: Seal just-softer-than-hard-boiled eggs inside good-quality sausage meat (3.5 ounces/100g per egg), dip first in flour, then into beaten egg, then into fine, dry bread crumbs to coat. Deep-fry in hot oil at 325°F for about 5 minutes, until the sausage meat is cooked through.
- If you make your own sausages, add dry bread crumbs to the mixture – they will soak up fat and moisture, keeping the sausages juicy.
- Use to coat your own homemade fish fingers.

**And don’t forget toast** – one-or two-day-old bread makes better toast than fresh bread. Or do as Benjamin Franklin once said, “Give me yesterday’s Bread, this Day’s Flesh, and last Year’s Cyder.” Sounds good to me ... Or, try the recipes on the following pages.

## Using leftover bread

- [Beet hummus](#)

- Taramasalata
- Nettle pesto
- Panzanella
- Pain perdu
- Bread and butter pudding
- Brown bread ice cream
- Summer pudding



## Beet hummus

For this shocking-purple variation on the classic chickpea dip, bread is used as a thickener because beets make a thinner purée than chickpeas. I've given exact quantities here, but the way to make hummus is to add the ingredients a little at a time, tasting and tweaking

as you go, until you think it is perfect. You could make a larger batch – it will sit quite happily for several days in the fridge, ready to dip raw vegetables into when you fancy a snack. (SEE PHOTO)

*Serves 4*

1 tablespoon cumin seeds

0.88 ounce (25g) crustless, stale bread

7 ounces (200g) cooked beets

1 large garlic clove, peeled and crushed

1 tablespoon tahini (sesame seed paste), plus more as desired

Juice of 1 lemon

Salt and black pepper

Toast the cumin seeds in a dry frying pan over medium heat, shaking the pan almost constantly, until the seeds start to darken and smell amazing (less than 1 minute). While still hot, crush the seeds using a mortar and pestle or a spice grinder.

Break the bread into chunks and whiz in a food processor to crumbs. Add the beets, most of the garlic, the tahini, a good pinch of the ground cumin, half the lemon juice, a sprinkling of salt, and a good grinding of pepper. Blend to a thick paste.

Taste the hummus; you should be able to detect every flavor. If not, add a little more of whatever is lacking and blend again. Keep tasting and adjusting until you are happy. Serve with [FLAT BREAD](#) and/or vegetables for dipping.

## Taramasalata

If pollack are obliging enough to come into the River Cottage kitchen laden with roe, we salt, poach, and hang the roe in our cold smoker quicker than you can say *taramasalata* backward. This is our recipe.

*Serves 8*

About 3.5 ounces (100g) stale white bread, crusts removed

8.8 ounces (250g) smoked pollack or other fish roe

$\frac{2}{3}$  cup whole milk

1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed

7 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup plus 2 tablespoons sunflower oil

Juice of 1 lemon

Salt and black pepper

**To serve**

**Smoked paprika, for sprinkling**

**About 1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley**

**A little preserved lemon rind, cut into very thin strips  
(optional)**

Tear the bread into chunks and soak in the milk for a few minutes, then squeeze out and discard excess moisture and put the bread into a food processor, along with the roe and garlic.

With the machine on low speed, trickle in both oils through the feed tube in a steady stream. Add the lemon juice a little at a time, tasting as you go, until you are happy. Season with salt if needed (this depends on the saltiness of the roe), and a generous grinding of pepper.

Transfer the *taramasalata* to a serving bowl, sprinkle with a little smoked paprika, and scatter the chopped parsley and preserved lemon over the top if you have any. Serve with loads of [FLAT BREAD](#) or toast.





# Nettle pesto

This is a rural Devon, River Cottage version of the classic Italian sauce. We substitute nettles, canola oil, Cheddar, and bread crumbs for basil, olive oil, Parmesan, and pine nuts. Use it wherever you would use pesto – it is excellent swirled on top of creamy soups or tossed with pasta.

*Makes about 16 ounces (450g)*

0.7 ounce (20g) bread crumbs

3.5 ounces (100g) young nettles (or the top few leaves of older ones)

0.7 ounce (20g) strong Cheddar, grated

½ garlic clove, crushed to a paste with a little salt

¾ cup canola oil

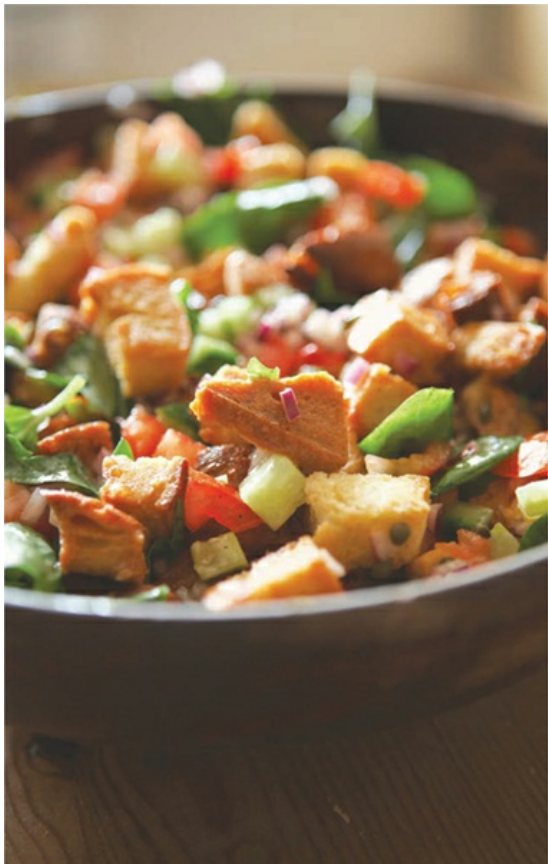
Salt and black pepper

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Scatter the bread crumbs on a baking sheet and bake for about 10 minutes, until dry and golden, checking them frequently toward the end as they burn quite quickly. Tip onto a plate and let cool.

Wearing gloves, pick over the nettles, discarding all but the thinnest stalks, then wash well. Fill a bowl with ice

water. Find a pan large enough to hold the nettles and fill it halfway with water. Bring to a boil and cram in the nettles, pushing them down with a wooden spoon to immerse them. Cook for just 1 minute, then drain through a sieve over a bowl to save the cooking water. Immediately plunge the nettles into the ice water. As soon as they are cold, remove and squeeze them as dry as you can – they will not sting you once they are cooked.

Put the nettles into a food processor along with the bread crumbs, cheese, and garlic. With the machine on low speed, trickle in enough canola oil to make a loose paste. (Alternatively, you can grind the nettles, bread crumbs, cheese, and garlic to a paste using a mortar and pestle, then slowly incorporate the oil.) Season your pesto with salt and pepper to taste. It is now ready to use. As for the nettle cooking water you saved, drink it – it's too good to waste.



# Panzanella

This Tuscan bread salad is excellent eaten on its own for lunch, but also just right with grilled food, or anything else that you want to eat outdoors with a bottle of wine on a hot summer's day. As with all peasant food, there are limitless variations, so feel free to adjust this recipe. That said, I would never attempt to make it if I didn't have some really good ripe tomatoes and decent extra-virgin olive oil.

*Serves 4*

About 1 pound, 2 ounces (500g) stale white bread  
(ideally, ciabatta or sourdough)

$\frac{2}{3}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 large red onion, finely chopped

$\frac{1}{2}$  cucumber, chopped quite small

4 good-sized ripe tomatoes, chopped quite small

A handful of small capers

5 teaspoons good-quality white wine vinegar or cider vinegar

A pinch of superfine sugar

Flaky sea salt and black pepper

A big bunch of basil, leaves only

Preheat the oven to 350°F. In a roasting pan, toss the bread with half of the olive oil, then bake, shaking the pan occasionally, until golden and crispy. You can skip this step – many Italians would – but it adds texture and flavor, which I like. Let cool, then toss with the onion, cucumber, tomatoes (including all their juices), and capers in a large serving bowl.

In another bowl, whisk the rest of the olive oil with the vinegar and sugar. Pour this dressing over the salad and season generously with salt and pepper. Tear the basil, add it to the bowl, and toss it all together. Taste for seasoning.

You can serve the salad right away, or let it stand at room temperature for an hour or so to let the flavors blend.



# Pain perdu

This is a classic French dessert, with a name that translates as “lost” or “forgotten” bread. Basically, it is sugary, eggy bread, which is truly delicious topped with seasonal fruit. Try it with poached rhubarb, or with summer berries – some of them puréed. Serve for dessert, or brunch if you prefer.

*Serves 6*

3 thick slices stale white bread, crusts removed

4 large free-range eggs

7 tablespoons (3.5 ounces/100g) superfine sugar

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup plus 2 tablespoons whole milk

A few drops of pure vanilla extract

About 7 tablespoons (3.5 ounces/100g) unsalted butter

**To serve**

**Poached fruit or summer berries**

Cut the bread slices in half diagonally. In a mixing bowl, whisk together the eggs and sugar for a couple of minutes to help dissolve the sugar, then add the milk and vanilla and whisk again. Pour this mixture into a shallow dish (large enough to hold all the bread in a single layer). Lay the bread slices in the dish, let soak for 1 minute, then

turn them over and soak for another minute.

In the meantime, set a frying pan over medium-low heat. Once the bread has soaked, add a generous pat of butter to the pan – enough to just cover the bottom of the pan once melted. As soon as the butter is frothing (don't let it brown), lay as many bread slices in the pan as will comfortably fit and fry for 2 to 3 minutes on each side, until golden brown.

Remove the *pain perdu* from the pan and keep it warm while you fry the rest of the bread slices, adding more butter to the pan as necessary. Serve right away, with poached fruit or berries.

## Variation

You can flambé the bread, too, if you like. Add a splash of Cognac, Grand Marnier, or whatever you fancy, right at the end. Set alight with a match and let burn until the flame has subsided.





# Bread and butter pudding

If you don't like bread and butter pudding, the chances are that you've never had one that's been made properly. This recipe should change your mind.

*Serves 6*

About 1 pound, 5 ounces (600g) one-or two-day-old white bread

About 3½ tablespoons (1.8 ounces/50g) unsalted butter, softened

1¼ cups heavy cream

1¼ cups whole milk

1 vanilla bean pod

6 medium free-range egg yolks

¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons (7 ounces/200g) superfine sugar

A good handful of raisins (optional)

Butter a shallow oval baking dish measuring about 12 by 8 inches. Cut the bread into medium-thick slices, butter them, then cut off the crusts and halve the slices on the diagonal to form triangles.

Pour the cream and milk into a saucepan. Split the vanilla

pod lengthwise, scrape out the seeds with a teaspoon, and add them to the pan, along with the empty pod. Bring just to a boil over medium heat, then remove from the heat and let infuse for 10 minutes. In a large bowl, briefly whisk together the egg yolks and  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup (5.3 ounces/150g) of the sugar to combine. Pour in the hot milk and cream mixture, including the vanilla pod, whisking all the time. This is your custard.

Arrange the triangles of bread in the baking dish – in rows, propped up and leaning on each other so they come just above the rim of the dish, sprinkling the raisins in between. Continue in this way until you've filled the dish and used all the bread, cutting up the triangles and tucking in the pieces as you need to. Don't try to be neat - the point of layering like this is that the propped-up ends, which stand clear of the custard, turn golden and crispy in the oven. Try not to leave too many raisins exposed, as they are liable to scorch during baking.

Pour in the custard, making sure you moisten all the pieces of bread. Let the pudding stand for 20 minutes or so to allow the custard to soak in. Heat the oven to 350°F and boil the kettle.

When you are ready to bake, sprinkle on the rest of the sugar. Set the dish in a roasting pan and pour in enough boiling water to come halfway up the sides of the dish (this bain marie will help to keep the pudding soft). Bake

for 20 to 30 minutes, until the custard is just set in the middle – prod the top with your finger to check. Serve hot or warm, with cream or ice cream.



## Brown bread ice cream

This is vanilla ice cream dappled with little golden, sweet, nutty-tasting, chewy treats, so it tastes that much better. Ideally, you would make this in an ice cream maker, but if you don't own one, there is another way (see below).

*Makes about 2½ cups (600ml)*

3.5 ounces (100g) fresh or one-or two-day-old whole-wheat bread

½ cup (3.5 ounces/100g) light brown sugar, or Demerara sugar

1 cup plus 1 tablespoon whole milk

1 vanilla bean pod

6 medium free-range egg yolks

½ cup plus 1 tablespoon (4.4 ounces/125g) superfine sugar

1 cup plus 1 tablespoon heavy cream

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Tear the bread into smallish pieces, toss with the brown sugar, and scatter on a baking sheet. Bake for 10 minutes or so, until quite dark and caramelized. Let cool on the baking sheet.

Meanwhile, pour the milk into a heavy-bottomed pan.

Split the vanilla pod lengthwise, scrape out the seeds with a teaspoon, and add them to the milk, together with the empty pod. Slowly bring just to a boil.

Meanwhile, in a large mixing bowl, briefly whisk together the egg yolks and superfine sugar, then slowly pour in the hot milk, whisking constantly. Add the vanilla pod, too. Pour the mixture back into the saucepan and set over low heat. Stir constantly with a wooden spoon or silicone spatula for about 5 minutes, until the custard is thick enough to coat the back of the spoon; do not let it overheat, or it may curdle.

As soon as it is ready, pour the custard into a cold bowl, cover with plastic wrap to prevent a skin from forming, and let infuse for at least 10 minutes.

Remove the vanilla pod, stir in the cream, and churn the mixture in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's instructions. When the ice cream is thickened and almost ready but still a little soft, crumble in the toasted bread and churn until frozen.

**P.S.** If you do not have an ice cream maker, freeze the mixture in a suitable bowl in the freezer, taking it out and whisking or beating it every half hour over the next few hours, until it becomes too firm to beat, then allow to freeze completely. Ice cream made this way will be harder

when fully frozen, so you will need to allow extra time for it to soften slightly before serving. It will be delicious nonetheless.





# Summer pudding

This is a celebration of the English summer, so make it with homegrown fruit if you possibly can. The mix of fruits should be governed by what is in season. Try for a balance of sweet and tart fruits – say, strawberries, raspberries, red currants, black currants, and blueberries. You will need a 3¾-cup pudding mold and a plate small enough to fit inside the rim. (SEE PHOTO OF THE WHOLE PUDDING.)

*Serves 4*

1 pound, 5 ounces (600g) mixed ripe soft fruits (see above)

7 tablespoons (3.5 ounces/100g) superfine sugar

6 to 8 medium-thick slices of one-or two-day-old white bread, crusts removed

Put the fruits and sugar into a heavy-bottomed pan over medium heat, stir together, and bring just to a boil, stirring regularly. Simmer for 1 minute only, then remove from the heat. The fruits will release a fair amount of juice.

Line the bottom and sides of a 3¾-cup pudding mold with slices of bread, overlapping them slightly and cutting them to fit as necessary. Reserve a slice or two for the

“lid.”

Fill the mold with all of the fruit and most of the juice, saving a few tablespoonfuls (or more) for serving. You may find you have more juice than you need; this depends on the fruit and its ripeness.

Cut the reserved bread to fit the top, place a plate on top that just fits inside the rim, and weight it with a couple of cans from the cupboard. Refrigerate for about 8 hours.

To serve, invert the pudding onto a large plate and pour over the reserved juice. Serve with cream.



Building a Clay Oven

**If I were a lump of dough**, proofing my final minutes away and contemplating the manner of my passing, I'd choose the old-fashioned way to go – to be slipped, bare-bottomed, straight onto the ash-covered floor of a hell-hot wood-fired oven. However, these days I'd be hard pushed to find such an oven. A few small artisan bakers still use one, and so do some authentic pizzerias; you might even find one in an old house – nestled in the side of an inglenook fireplace. Your best bet, however, is to build your own.

This is not as ridiculous as it may sound. With a little effort and not too much money, you can build an oven from clay, sand, and bricks in your back garden – an oven that is capable of reaching temperatures of 750°F and above, in which you could bake bread or pizzas, or even your Sunday roast.

Almost anything you can cook in your domestic oven, you'll be able to cook in a clay oven, and in most cases the food will be better for it. I would probably draw the line at a sponge cake or a soufflé, which are fragile affairs that need a temperature dial and an airtight door. On the other hand, I would certainly give scones and Yorkshire puddings a go.

So, if you can find 2½ square yards in your garden, and a few spare days in your life, you could build yourself something truly special. Your humble backyard could be transformed into a Mecca of gastronomy.

## How a clay oven works

Clay ovens are simple: You light a fire inside the oven and keep it stoked long enough for the heat to fully penetrate the walls and floor. You then remove some or all of the embers and bake using the residual heat. A well-built oven with a close-fitting door will retain heat for many hours, even with all the embers removed.

## Building your oven

You will be building a simple igloo-shaped clay-and-sand oven, set on some sort of raised plinth. You can tailor the size of your oven to suit your needs, so consider what they will be. Will you be baking two or three loaves at a time, or a dozen? Do you want to be able to fit a whole shoulder of pork in it, or will you never cook anything larger than a leg of lamb?

There is more chance of scorching food in a small, cramped oven because the oven is hottest around the edges (as the heat radiates from the walls and floor). On the other hand, a large oven will take more fuel to heat, so I wouldn't make it any larger than you think you will need.

To make things simpler, I will give measurements for an oven that is a good size to bake a few loaves, or three or four pizzas at the same time, or to hold a large roasting pan. It will have an internal oven space about 32 inches in diameter and 16 inches high, and the oven will need to sit on a square plinth measuring about 5 feet by 5 feet. In practice, it is quite straightforward for you to scale this up or down. The entire oven size is dictated by a single measurement: the diameter of a hemisphere of sand, which you will build, and around which your oven will be molded.



## The plinth

Technically, you could build an oven at ground level, but in practice you'd be bending down too far to see into it. The nearer to eye level you get, the easier it will be on your back, but an eye-level oven would mean an awful lot of plinth, which you may find rather obtrusive. You should also take into account the fact that you will be scraping hot ember out of the oven. These need to drop into something, and the further they have to fall, the more chance they will miss your container and land on your foot. Ideally, you want to raise the floor of the oven to

somewhere between 3½ and 5 feet.

There are any number of possible ways to build your plinth, and I am sure you will want to think aesthetically as well as structurally. As it will be purpose-built, it may as well look good and be designed to fit in with your garden. As I'm not familiar with your garden, I can't tell you whether your finish should be timber, sandstone, or jewel-encrusted mirrors, but I can tell you that the structure must be solid and stable – as indeed must be the ground you build it on.

You should allow yourself a good 5 feet of clear space in front of the place where your oven door will be sited: this area becomes your “kitchen” and you will need room to move about in it. The top of the plinth should be made of brick, stone, or concrete. Remember that this will become the floor of the oven and, as such, needs to be made as flat as possible.

Our plinth at River Cottage is 4 feet square and 27½ inches high. The walls are railway ties, set on solid, level ground and fixed with right-angled brackets on the internal corners. The plinth is filled in with rubble, the top of which is leveled with sand to about 2 inches below the top of the ties. Plain London bricks are set on this, upside down (flat side up), in a herringbone pattern, to form a level top. The gaps between the bricks are filled with more sand.

This construction works well, but there are other options. I once had an ugly, square, concrete-walled coal bunker in my garden that would have made an ideal



plinth. A stack of cinderblocks would do the job, too.

## **Weatherproofing**

You may wish to construct a simple roof to protect your oven, though this is not essential; you could just keep it covered with a tarpaulin when you are not using it. A roof can be anything you want it to be – it just needs to keep off the worst of the rain. A little water isn't going to hurt, but a soaking-wet oven will not get hot enough, and badly weather-beaten clay will start to erode.

Bear in mind, too, that a lot of smoke will be coming out of the oven, and the roof is bound to affect the airflow around it. I suggest it should clear the top of your oven by at least 3½ feet. You may wish to construct a chimney if you feel the space is too enclosed – say, if you are building up against a wall. The roof over our clay oven at River Cottage is made of corrugated iron.

## **The three stages of building your oven**

There will be three layers to your clay oven and you will need a separate day to build each one, as each layer needs to dry fully before you start the next one. Drying time depends largely on the weather, but you can – and should – accelerate the process by lighting a fire inside.

The oven consists of an inner skin, made of a mixture of sand, clay, and water; an insulating layer, made of clay, wood shavings, and water; and an outer wall, made again of sand, clay, and water, with a brick arch doorway, if you

wish.

This is an uncomplicated project, but it does require some work, and I strongly recommend that you rope in a few able bodies to help with the grunt work. A merry band of three or four helpers will make light of a job that you might find a little daunting alone. Plan roughly when you will tackle each of the stages and let them know, but ask them to be flexible, as the weather will determine how much time you'll need between the three building days.

## Sourcing your materials

Before you begin, you will need to obtain 8 buckets of clay and 18 buckets of sand. By bucket, I mean a large metal pail, rather than a household mop bucket. You will also need two grocery bags full of wood shavings, a large heavy-duty tarpaulin, a newspaper, and a thin stick. This will become your measuring stick, and you'll need to mark it  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches from one end – with a pen or tape, or by cutting a notch. If you want to build a door and a chimney lid, you will need about  $5\frac{1}{2}$  square feet of wood (hardwood is best),  $\frac{3}{4}$  to  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inches thick, and a decent saw.

**Clay** The easiest way to get ahold of some clay is to go digging. It is very easy to find, though away from a source of water, clay is likely to be pretty dry. At River Cottage, we built a pond in the lower field, and we dig our clay from its banks. If you have access to

such a pond, or a stream or small river, you will be able to do the same – with permission from the landowner, of course.

Your clay should be squishy and reasonably free of other soils and stones; take a small piece and work it with your hands until it is supple, then roll into a snake and wrap it around your finger. It should not break.

You may prefer to buy your clay, of course. I have yet to find a nearby building supply store that sells it, but a friendly local potter or perhaps an art school should be able to point you in the right direction.

**Sand** This is a natural material, too, and if you can get it for free so much the better. Otherwise, building supply stores sell it pretty cheaply. Any grade will be fine.

**Bricks** A building supply store again is probably your best option, or a reclamation yard if you happen to have one locally. Buy whatever bricks take your fancy.

**Wood shavings** Any lumberyard or sawmill will probably be happy to sell you wood shavings. These should not be too coarse or too fine – the texture of muesli would be

good.

## The first day

### To-do list:

- Mix the clay and sand
- Build the sand form
- Build the inner skin
- Remove the sand form
- Begin drying

### Mix the clay and sand

Spread out the tarpaulin on the ground and tip 6 buckets of sand and 3 buckets of clay onto it ([PIC 1](#)). This will give you enough for today's work, but if you want to get ahead of yourself, you could double the amount, which will give you enough for the outer wall, too.

Stick a pair of wellies or stout rubber boots on as many friends as you can muster and start stomping ([PIC 2](#)). Throw out any stones as you come across them. Every so often, take hold of both corners of one end of the tarpaulin and pull it over to meet the other end ([PIC 3](#)); this will turn the sand and clay over on itself, helping to mix it thoroughly.

You may feel the mixture is just too firm, dry, and difficult to work, in which case you need to add some

water – this is likely if the clay was very dry to begin with. If you dug clay from a riverbank or pond, it will probably be wet enough already. The final consistency of the mixture should be soft enough to mold and shape easily, and strong enough to hold its own weight.

When your mixture is looking pretty well blended, test the consistency. Take a small piece (the size of a lime) and spend a minute or so compacting it. Now hold it at shoulder height and drop it onto the ground. On impact, it should crack but roughly hold its shape ([PIC 4](#)). If it crumbles, the mixture is too sandy and you need to add more clay. If it “splats,” it is too wet and you should add more sand. When you are happy with the consistency, your building material – or “mud” as I prefer to call it – is ready to use.



1



2



3



4

## Build the sand form

The first stage of building is to make a dome of sand, which will be the form around which you build the inner skin of the oven. First, trace a circle 32 inches in diameter, centered on the plinth. Next, heap sand into the circle and start forming a dome – or almost a dome ([PIC 5](#)). The mound should rise vertically to start with, to about a hand's width, before it starts to curve inward; this gives much more headroom for anything cooking next to the wall. The finished dome should be about 16 inches high.

From time to time, stand on the plinth, center your eyes

over the dome, and get a bird's-eye view of your work (PIC 6) – it is much easier to spot imperfections from up there. When you are happy, the next step is to cover the dome with a layer of wet newspaper. You will be digging out the sand later; this newspaper layer tells you when to stop digging. Soak whole sheets and lay them over the dome (PIC 7); you don't need to be neat, by any means – just make sure you completely cover the sand (PIC 8). This is slightly harder in practice than it sounds, but only slightly; the paper won't stick to the sand as well as you might hope, but it will stick to itself.



5



6





7



8

## Build the inner skin

You are now ready to start building your oven. The technique is simple. Pick up a good handful of your clay and sand “mud” and pat and mold it into a rough brick shape. Sit this adjacent to the dome and, using the edge of one hand as a mallet and the other hand as support, pack the brick down to a width of about  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches (PIC 9), using your measuring stick as a guide. Make a second brick and set it alongside, packing it down in the same way. The “bricks” should merge into one (PIC 10). Compacting is essential. Apart from giving the structure

more solidity, it removes air pockets, which can expand with the heat of the oven and cause cracks.

Continue like this until you get all the way around, then start your second layer, and so on. You don't need to measure every time, but poke your stick in every now and then to make sure you maintain the thickness. And don't forget your bird's-eye view – this is still your best guide. Once you reach the top and close the gap, take some more time to check the depth and smooth your dome; the more even the structure, the stronger it will be.

When you are happy with the shape, have a cleanup. Your work is almost done. Save any leftover mud – splash a little water over it, shovel into plastic bags or trash bags, tie the tops to keep it from drying out, and save it for later. Now would be a good time to have lunch. You should leave your oven to settle on itself and firm up a bit for at least a couple of hours; you could even leave it overnight if it suits you better. You want it to get used to being there.



9



10

## Remove the sand form

Now comes the fun bit: you are going to take away your oven's support. With a decent knife (a bread knife, funnily enough, is perfect), cut an arch where you want your door to be ([PIC 11](#)). This will not be the finished doorway so don't worry about making it perfect. Decide how wide you want it. Do you have a particular baking sheet that needs to fit through? A reasonable size would be 12 inches wide and perhaps 8 inches high.

Pull out the mud from the arch that you have cut ([PIC 12](#)), then, with one hand, start hollowing out the sand

(PIC 13). Keep digging, inward, sideways, and upward. You won't be able to see what you're doing – your arm will be in the way – but at some point you will reach your layer of newspaper (PIC 14). As you expose it, peel it away; this is too satisfying for words.

Keep digging and peeling, ignoring the little voice in your head that is telling you the whole thing will collapse at any minute. It won't. As you get deeper, be aware of your arm – it is easy to bash the side of the archway if you don't concentrate. When you finally scrape out the last bit of sand, take a step back and marvel at your oven. It really is still standing.



11



12



13



14

## Begin drying

Over the next few days, you want your oven to dry out completely. Light a fire inside as often as you can. This can be tricky, as there is a lot of moisture inside and not much oxygen, but I suggest you resist using cheaty methods such as lighter fluid, fire starters, or gasoline (unless you want your bread to taste of these). It is best to light a small fire near the doorway, where there is more air, then push it to the back once it is going strong. Your oven is fully dry when it has stopped steaming during firing; the color will be considerably paler, too.

## The second day

### To-do list:

- Build the door arch and chimney
- Make a clay slip
- Build the insulating layer
- Continue drying

### Build the door arch and chimney

You can form the door arch from your clay and sand mud, but I recommend that you make it from bricks. It will look more attractive, and bricks are stronger, withstanding little knocks far better.

Build a sand form the same size as your doorway, extending forward a brick's length from the base of the oven. Now build an archway around the front section of the form, using some of your reserved clay and sand mixture as mortar between the bricks ([PIC 15](#)). Use more clay and sand to extend the doorway back to meet the receding wall of the oven ([PIC 16](#)). Cut a hole in the top of this, roughly 8 inches in diameter, and form a chimney around the hole, around 8 inches high ([PIC 17](#)). Remove the sand form after a few hours.





16



17

## Make a clay slip

Get your wellies on again. Drag out your tarpaulin and empty one bucket of clay onto it. Pour about half a bucket of warm water onto the clay and start stomping. As the water gets blended in, keep adding more until you have a sludgy gloop the consistency of thick yogurt – this is called “slip.” You can make the slip in a trash can, mixing it with your hands ([PIC 18](#)) if you prefer. Next, start to mix in the wood shavings with a shovel. Keep going until the slip binds the shavings together ([PIC 19](#)).





18



19

## Build the insulating layer

Using the same method as you used on the first day to build the **INNER SKIN**, pack your wood and clay mixture over the dome, again to a thickness of about  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches, using your measuring stick as a guide. Skirt around the doorway – you don't need to insulate the arch.



## Continue drying

Dry out this insulating layer completely, building the odd fire as before ([SEE BEGIN DRYING](#)) over the next few days to hasten the process.

## The third day

### To-do list:

- Build the outer wall
- Make a door and chimney lid (optional)



## Build the outer wall

You need to apply exactly the same method as you used to build the inner skin, though you'll find this stage much more satisfying. Keep fussing over your outer wall until it looks the way you want it to. You could decorate it, if you like – using some natural paints perhaps, or stud it with stones. The important thing is that the oven can breathe, or it will retain moisture – so don't smother it in tiles or anything else that is not porous. Dry it out, building fires, as before.

## Make a door and chimney lid

Measure and cut a piece of wood to fit snugly inside the door arch. Cut a short rod for a handle and glue or nail it to the outside of the door. Cut a circle from another piece of wood to sit on the chimney. These will not be fireproof, of course; they are for retaining heat after the fire has been removed. Soaking them in water before every use will help keep them from warping. Your oven is now ready to use.

## Using your oven

The oven will need 3 to 4 hours of firing to get up to temperature. Start a small fire just inside the doorway, using paper and small kindling, then build it up with larger pieces of wood until it is burning well. When it is established, use sticks to slide the burning wood carefully

right to the back, then keep feeding it with more wood as you need to, in order to maintain a good, rolling flame. The heat will become ferocious. I cannot give precise timings – you will get used to your own oven – but if the outer wall feels fairly warm, you can be pretty sure the inside is scorching. For the last 10 minutes, spread the embers out to get extra heat into the whole floor.

When you are ready to cook, scrape or shovel out all the embers into a metal trash can, or better still, something with a flat side that can sit flush to the wall of the plinth. At River Cottage, we use a pig-feeding trough, which is ideal.

For most cooking, you will need to wait for the oven to cool a bit. The internal air temperature can be as high as 850°F, even with the fire removed completely. The surface temperature of the floor will be even hotter. This is perfect for cooking pizza, which will be ready in a little over a minute, but nothing could withstand this heat for any longer. A loaf of bread would be black in no time. An oven thermometer would be helpful, but I have not found one that can measure above 600°F. In time, you will become a reliable temperature gauge. As you get to know your oven, you will get used to the searing heat – the feel of it on your skin as you reach in. I reckon if I can hold my hand just inside the doorway for a couple of seconds, I can probably bake a batch of bread without too much scorching. If I can't, I wait.

When I'm making bread, I shape a couple of small balls of dough (the size of a lemon) for testing. I put one into

the oven and check it after a couple of minutes. If it shows signs of scorched patches, particularly on the bottom, I wait 5 minutes or so, then test the other ball. If this one is only turning golden after 2 minutes, I go for it. If it scorches again, I give it another 10 minutes or so before putting in the loaves.

To bake bread, follow your chosen recipe, then slip your loaves into the clay oven one at a time. Keep an eye on them; you will almost certainly want to shuffle them around so they color more evenly. To bake pizza, follow the [RECIPE](#).

Once the bread is baked, I feel it is a shame to waste the residual heat, so I almost always have something ready to follow it with – the temperature would now be perfect for a joint of meat, for example. Also, don't forget that your oven will make an effective, if rather immobile, patio heater.

As your oven settles into life, you may find cracks appearing. Don't worry unduly about this. If they become large, fill them in with clay, otherwise the efficiency of your oven may be affected. Some day, depending on how well it is sheltered and how often it is used, it will be time to knock your oven down and build a new one. Don't feel too downhearted about this. After all, everything returns to earth ... in the end.



Useful Things

## Further reading

### *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*

Elizabeth David

(Penguin Books, 1977)

### *The Tassajara Bread Book*

Edward Espe Brown

(Shambhala Publications, 1970)

### *Baking with Passion (Baker & Spice)*

Dan Lepard and Richard Whittington

(Quadrille, 2003)

### *McGee on Food and Cooking*

Harold McGee

(Hodder & Stoughton, 2004)





**SHIPTON  
MILL**  
*Organic Spoutina*  
1kg  
CERTIFIED BY B  
SHIPTON MILL, TETSBURY, GLOSHERSTERSHIRE, GL9 8PL



## Notes to the U.S. edition

In editing this book for an American audience, we sought to do two things: (1) to make it as much a treasure trove of information, inspiration, and solid cooking guidance for Americans as it is for its original British audience; and (2) to retain Daniel Steven's engaging style. To that end, the recipes and cooking instructions, as well as the information about ingredients and equipment, have been Americanized, so that the ingredients, terminology, and measurements are familiar to U.S. readers. We've made our best attempt to address these particulars. Any errors or omissions are that of the American publisher, Ten Speed Press.

**Weight and volume** In the recipes, both weights and volumes are provided. Using weight measurements is recommended, because weight is far more accurate than volume. This is because various methods of measuring dry ingredients (for example, scooping the ingredients with the cup versus spooning ingredients into the cup, how loose or compact the ingredients are within the cup, and whether or not you level the top of the measure) can cause significant variations. However, if you are using the volume measurement, spoon measures are level unless otherwise stated: 1 teaspoon = 5 ml spoon; 1 tablespoon = 15 ml spoon.

**Herbs and spices** Use fresh herbs and freshly ground pepper unless otherwise suggested.

**Convection ovens** Oven timings in the recipes relate to convection ovens. If using a conventional electric or gas oven, increase the temperature by 25°F. Use an oven thermometer to check the accuracy of your oven.

**Superfine sugar** Superfine sugar is made up of small, white crystals that blend quite easily into other ingredients and dissolves very quickly in liquid. You can make your own superfine sugar by whirling granulated sugar in a blender.





# Acknowledgments

I could not have done this without ...

## Everyone at Bloomsbury:

Richard Atkinson, you have always had something good to say about me; your encouragement makes such a difference.

Janet Illsley, you have put so much work into this, thank you. I am so impressed by how you have brought it all together and made sense of my ramblings.

Will Webb, you have made such a good-looking book. Thank you for everything you've done. Oh, and I'm still waiting to try your bread.

Penny Edwards, thank you for your hard work and attention to the production of this book.

Erica Jarnes, thank you so much for your help, and for always looking pleased to see me.

And Natalie Hunt, you have guided me through this brilliantly. I have felt properly looked after. I will miss my trips to the big city. Thank you so, so much. I hope we have made a book you are proud of.

## And everyone at River Cottage:

Thank you to Rob Love and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, for giving me this opportunity, for believing in me, and for sticking by me.

And to Gill Meller, you have given me great help and massive support. I've run out of excuses now ... I'd better get back in the kitchen. Cheers blood.

Thank you to Nikki Duffy for starting me off so well, and for your time and energy and endless, endless patience.

Debora Robertson, you have been amazing. You have worked so hard for me and given me so much encouragement, and so much belief in myself. Thank you also for *conquistadors* – the best word in the book!

### Not forgetting:

Aidan Chapman at the Town Mill Bakery: You have always been very generous with your knowledge. Thank you. I am a much better baker because of you.

Niamh, my lovely little bun. I hope you like the book I've made.

And Michelle Rose, Mia, and Olivia, thank you for letting us cover your kitchen in flour. I had a wonderful day making wonderful bread with you.

Hazel Maxwell, thank you for everything. I wish I were more like you. I love you.

### And last of all:

Thank you to Gavin Kingcome. Working with you was a complete pleasure. Your photographs are amazing. Your camera makes the world so much more beautiful. This started out a word book with pictures; it ended up a



picture book with words. It is our book.







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PLEASE LOVE ME  
- -

