

FRENCH BREAD

Makes 2 loaves

By Dennis W. Viau; adapted from traditional recipes

Homemade French bread has a special beauty all its own, and it usually generates “Oooo’s!” and “Ahhh’s!” when brought to the table. I was invited to a potluck lunch and I was on the “Bread” list. So I made this bread. Everyone else brought something they bought at the store. When word got around that I made the French bread, everyone lined up for a piece. Two loaves were gone in very little time. Homemade bread simply has that special appeal and mystique that engenders fascination and admiration. It’s also cheap. I buy my bread flour in 25-pound sacks at the warehouse store. A loaf of bread costs me about 25¢ if I don’t add beer.



Bread making is also easy when you have a stand mixer¹ (see notes at end). I made bread by hand for years before I bought a stand mixer. So feel free to use your hands; it’s good exercise.

Ingredients:

2 pounds (900g) bread flour (6 cups scooped or 7 cups sifted², see notes at end)
1 tablespoon yeast, instant or active dry
2½ cups (591ml) water
2 teaspoons salt

Directions:

Heat the water to about 115°F (45°C), or use warm tap water. In a mixer bowl combine approximately half the flour with the yeast. Mix in the warm liquid with a rubber spatula, scraping the sides and bottom of the bowl, and let rest for about 5 minutes to activate the yeast.

Add the remaining flour and the salt. Combine until thoroughly incorporated and then knead the dough for about 5 to 10 minutes, until smooth and elastic. It should be slightly sticky, so try to avoid any temptation to add more flour.

Place in a large buttered bowl and roll around to coat the entire surface with butter. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to rise in a cool (65°F/15°C) place until tripled in bulk, about two hours.

Deflate the dough a little and shape into a ball. Return to the bowl and cover again. Allow to rise a second time, about 1 hour. This additional rise will enhance the texture and flavor.

Divide into two even portions. Shape into loaves and place on a greased or lined baking sheet or baguette pan. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to rise again about 45 to 60 minutes.

Heat the oven to 425°F (220°C). Slit the top of each loaf diagonally a few times with a sharp knife or razor blade, about ¼ inch (6mm) deep. Place the loaves in the heated oven and spray the loaves and walls of the oven with water, **but don’t spray the bulb**; it might explode. Repeat a minute later and again another minute later. Wait 3 minutes and spray the oven and loaves one more time. Bake 20 minutes, turn off the heat, open the door about an inch or two and let the bread remain in the oven 5 minutes. The internal temperature of the bread should be between 195°F and 205°F (90°C and 96°C). Cool on a wire rack before cutting.

The step-by-step photos were removed. See the video for the preparation.

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NOTES

¹ I prefer using a stand mixer to knead the dough. You can easily knead it by hand, which is better for learning the texture of bread dough. After kneading for ten minutes it should be smooth and elastic and moist enough to almost stick to your hands. When you start kneading it will be way too sticky. Avoid any desire to add more flour. Keep kneading until the gluten develops and the dough takes on an elastic consistency. The dough will stick to your hands less as it becomes more elastic.

² Weighing flour for baking is the most accurate method. The quantity of flour can vary greatly when using a measuring cup. Two methods yield different results. *Scooping* (plunging an empty cup into a flour container and leveling off the top of the cup) can result in as much as 5.5 ounces of bread flour. *Sifting* (putting sifted flour into a cup and leveling off the top) typically weighs about 4.5 ounces. Baking requires accuracy. The best way to measure a cup of sifted flour is to place the empty cup on a large sheet of waxed paper or parchment paper. Sift flour into the cup (it will also sift all around it, thus the need for the paper) until the cup overflows. Level off the top of the cup with a knife without pressing the flour into the cup. The cup should contain about 4.5 ounces of bread flour. (Use the paper to pour the excess flour back into its container.) The original recipe called for 7 cups of sifted flour. $7 \times 4.5 = 31.5$, about 32 ounces, or 2 pounds. Six cups scooped: $6 \times 5.5 = 33$ ounces, again, about 2 pounds.