

THE HOWS AND WHYS OF MAKING HOMEMADE FRENCH BREAD

FOR THE

DOMESTICALLY CHALLENGED

Corrine Dolan

Are you the type of chef who considers decently-cooked instant pasta "fancy?" Are you daunted by a recipe more complex than scrambled eggs? Well, if so, making anything from scratch probably sounds ludicrous. Let me assure you, when I moved into my first apartment at nineteen, I had never cooked a full meal. I had never mastered simple tasks like frying a piece of chicken or sautéing an onion. I could scramble an egg or make a nice cup of coffee, but that was the extent of my cooking skills.

As it turns out, eggs get boring after a while, as does paying ridiculous amounts of money for take-out. It was hard for me, as a broke college student, to justify spending \$6 on a salad when a chicken sandwich is a dollar. As a result, I ate an excessive amount of greasy, fatty food during my first month on my own. I was in for an unpleasant surprise at the end of the month when I was out of money and my jeans were getting tight. After just four weeks, my wallet and my waistline dictated that I learn how to cook.

Now that I've been left to my own devices for about a year, I still feel pretty clueless in the kitchen. I have no natural knack for mixing spices; unlike my dad, I can't take a whiff of paprika and instantly know what flavors will compliment it. I rely heavily on a food thermometer to know when meat is fully cooked, since my ability to tell by texture and color is shaky. Winging it is still out of the question for me, but with a good recipe and a well-stocked pantry, I've managed to convince my guests that I have a knack for the culinary arts. (I only live in near-constant fear that I'll be exposed as a fraud.)

Besides the fun of pretending to know what I'm doing, I've also found that cooking from scratch is simply a lot less scary than buying pre-made food. I don't know what guar gum, MSG, or red 40 is, but I know that I won't find it in the baking section of any supermarket. Since there is scientific literature stating that literally everything will give you cancer or diabetes or leprosy,

it's nice knowing that by cooking from scratch, I have at least dramatically decreased my chances of ingesting formaldehyde or asbestos.

I'm a natural kind of gal anyway; I buy my clothes second hand and I recycle tin foil because of the environmental impact. Whenever possible, I do my errands on foot. The fast-food industry is not very environmentally friendly, and it is inconsistent for me to support an industry that is disposable and damaging to the planet.

But it's not just fast food chains that are the culprit. Grocery store foods are often highly over-packaged. For some reason, we as American consumers have the idea that wrapped in plastic = sanitary. I recognize that inevitably, some of our food is going to have to come in a package. It's probably a health code violation for Walmart to sell meat in anything but a styrofoam and plastic cocoon. But cooked foods like bread -- do they really have to be so bundled up? If so, why can't we use a paper bag instead of a plastic one?

Since I am a hopeless tree hugger at heart, I decided to do what little I can to reduce the amount of plastic I throw away. For me, this journey started with making a loaf of bread based on instructions I found online, instead of buying one. I was very intimidated by the prospect at first because I really thought bread making was something only old-fashioned pioneer women or the Betty Crockers of the world could conquer. As it turns out, it was actually far simpler than the endeavor of creating most entrees. I must stress, if I can do it, I doubt there is anyone who can't!

As someone who had never even tasted homemade bread until I made a loaf for myself, I was shocked to learn that bread doesn't have to have a uniform, spongy, and bland texture throughout! Instead, homemade bread usually has a firmer, crispier crust with a soft inside. The air bubbles sometimes leave little holes or irregularities throughout the loaf. The overall impression is much tastier and appetizing than something that has been sitting on a grocery store shelf for a few weeks.

If you too are interested in pretending to know what you are doing, not getting cancer, not treating the earth like a garbage bin, saving money, and creating some of the best bread you'll ever taste, continue reading for a simple French bread recipe for the novice chef!

A Quick Price Break Down Before We Begin

A loaf of Walmart's bakery bread will cost you \$3 for about six servings
This recipe makes two loaves of bread, which is about twelve servings

5lbs of Gold Medal Better for Bread Flour is about \$3.13

- There are 20 cups in 5lbs
- $\$3.13/20\text{cups} = \0.16 per cup
- $\$0.16 \times 3.5 = \0.56

\$0.56 of flour in this recipe

5lb bag of Walmart's Great Value Sugar will cost you \$2.62

- 5lbs of sugar is 480 teaspoons.
- $\$2.62/480 = \0.0055 per teaspoon
- $\$.0055 \times 2 = \0.01

\$0.01 of sugar in this recipe

4oz of Fleishmann's Active Dry Yeast is \$4.14 at Walmart.

- 4oz of yeast is about 39 teaspoons
- $\$4.14/39 = \0.11 per teaspoon
- $\$0.11 \times 1.5 = \0.17

\$0.17 of yeast in this recipe

26oz of Morton Iodized Salt is \$1.12 at Walmart

- 26oz of salt is about 130 teaspoons
- $\$1.12/130 = \0.0076 per teaspoon
- $\$0.0076 \times 1 = \text{less than } \0.01

< \$0.01 of salt in this recipe

+

Total Cost of Ingredients: \$0.75

Total Savings: \$2.25

Cost Per Serving of Walmart Bread: \$0.50

Cost Per Serving of Homemade Bread: \$0.06

Total Savings Per Serving: \$0.46

A Simple French Bread

With only a half hour of active prep work, you can create something that will totally convince your guests that you are Betty Crocker. Not only will it taste better than anything that comes out of a plastic bag, but it's more cost-effective and contains no ingredients you can't pronounce. A loaf of Arnold's Whole Grain Bread (probably the healthiest you can find in the grocery store) has 22 ingredients, and I can only pronounce a few of them. This recipe has only five ingredients!

Prep time

Active: about 30 minutes

Total: about 2 hours

Utensils

- Measuring cups
- Measuring spoons
- A large bowl
- Cookie sheet or bread pan
- Rolling pin



Ingredients

- 1 ¼ cups warm water (about 90 degrees)
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 - 3 ½ cups bread flour
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- 1 ½ teaspoons active dry yeast



Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
2. Combine yeast and sugar in a large bowl.
3. Stir in the water until everything is dissolved.



This is about what your bread should look like after step four.

4. Add the salt, then gradually add the flour. Depending on the temperature of your water and the humidity of the day, you may barely get 3 cups in, or you get even more than 3 ½. Just keep adding a ¼ cup at a time until you have a large ball of dough that isn't too sticky. (It's not an exact science, so don't sweat it.)

5. Cover the bowl with a towel and let the dough rise for an hour. (This, for me, is a great time to get started on the main course I'm making) It should roughly double in size.

6. Once your bread has doubled in size, divide the dough in half. (I usually freeze one half of the dough to use later in the week. As long as you freeze it *after* it has risen, thawed dough should bake fine.)

7. Use a rolling pin to work your dough into a rectangle about the size of a sheet of paper.



Your rectangle will not be perfect!



If you're feeling really fancy, score the top of your bread with a sharp knife after you roll it up and seal the edges.

8. Gently but snugly roll your dough up long ways, and dip your finger in water to seal the seams where the edges meet. If you don't seal your edges, your bread will unroll while it's baking. The taste won't be affected, but Betty Crocker wouldn't stand for this!

9. If you'd rather have a thicker, shorter loaf (which is better for slicing into sandwich bread), you can forgo the rolling in a simply mold your dough to fit a bread pan. This will

take a little longer to bake and in my opinion is less aesthetically pleasing, but if you'd like to kick your grocery store bread habit with the tastiest homemade sandwich bread, there is no better way!

10. Bake your bread on a lightly greased cookie sheet for 20-25 minutes. If you've decided to use a bread pan, it may take closer to 30 minutes. When it's golden brown, remove it from the oven and feel like a rockstar.

This bread will go marvelously with a plate of pasta or a hearty soup. For a delicious breakfast, toast a piece and slather in jam or butter. Slice this loaf and dunk into a mixture of cinnamon, vanilla, and eggs for the richest French toast you'll ever have. The possibilities are endless! Happy baking!



Ta-Da! Isn't that prettier than store bought bread?