



A Bread Baking Kickstart

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Making Dough at Home
in Your Spare Time

Editors Cut

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Table Of Contents

Copyright and Legal

- Copyright
- Book Version
- Recommended Settings
- Submit Errata
- Official Links
- Legal

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The Magic

Bread baking is magical in so many ways.

Flour, salt, water, and something to make the bread rise.

That's it.

These components come together to make something that is so much more than the sum of its parts.

Change the ratio of flour to water, get a different bread.

Use a different type of flour, get a different bread.

Add other ingredients, get a different bread.

Change the time or technique for leavening the bread, get a different bread.

Bake in different pans, use different shapes, or set your oven to different temperatures, get a different bread.

Pure magic.

Think of how many different magic tricks are possible with a single deck of cards.

The skills needed for many of the tricks might be similar but the result is different.

And yet -

A skilled card magician can look at a trick and figure out what is going on. They can see a new trick and realize it's just a variation on a trick they know or that it uses a novel combination of familiar techniques.

You are going to learn the analogous sort of magic used for baking bread. Of course, with this sort of magic, every practice is a performance.

You need to evaluate what you've just made and make notes about what you'll change next time.

The goal

This book kind of got away from me.

Like every book I sit down to write, I thought it would be a quick look at bread baking.

As I wrote it I began to see connections in recipes I've been baking for years and I wanted to share those with you.

You can flip to a section and make the recipe in this book or you can read from cover to cover first.

If you skip around, the recipe you want to make may use a technique I've explained earlier. I'll try to link back to it if you need to check it out.

You can learn to perform just the tricks that you're interested in.

"Hmmm," you think, "I'd like to make Hamburger Buns."

So you search for Hamburger Buns and follow that recipe.

You'll get great results.

What I'm hoping is that you'll explore more of the book so that when you get to Hamburger Buns you'll understand how adding the egg and the butter or oil changes the texture of the bread from other breads we've baked.

I want you to become a magician too - but I'm ok with you starting by learning a few tricks you want to perform for your friends.

Experiment

There is nothing sacred about the recipes in this book.

In fact, you'll likely find or create recipes you prefer to many of these recipes you'll find here.

Don't get me wrong, you will make great bread from the recipes in this book, but more importantly, this book gives you a framework that allows you to expand and explore.

You'll learn to work with baker's percentages so you can glance at recipes you find online or in books and understand what they're doing and successfully make your own adjustments to suit your own taste or needs.

"Oh no," you'll say, "that's way too much salt."

You'll recognize that your dough needs another fold or that the oven needs to be turned down a bit.

You'll see something in a video and try it and make it part of your process in the same way that a magician will see some little turn in a card trick and incorporate it into their own.

I love cookbooks and have more than one room filled with them. But after you have internalized a lot of the lessons in this book, you'll look at a recipe for a sourdough and wonder what happens if you replace some of the flour with rye, or whole wheat, or semolina, or whatever.

You'll want to make adjustments to hydration, added ingredients, time, or scale the recipe up or down.

We'll learn all of that.

I've organized the book so that you see links between recipes.

We'll make focaccia, pizza, pita, and bagels from the same dough so you see how differences in the way we treat the same dough leads to very different results.

I hope this resonates for you. For me, it transformed me from looking at each recipe as a stand-alone into someone who could see how the recipe fit in with others I've seen and made.

It let me dare to vary the ingredients or process. Maybe this thing I've made isn't what a professional baker would call a baguette, but I'm happy with it.

Keep a record of your bakes and make notes about what you like and what you want to change next time.

Sourdough or no

There are many ways of creating a sourdough starter but you can bake quite happily with or without one.

If you're never going to work with sourdough, then you don't need to read the relevant two sections in this chapter. Or maybe, you bake for a while and decide that now you want to try to use sourdough. Great. About two weeks before you want to bake with sourdough, go back and read that chapter.

Let me stop there for a second.

There are bullies and know-it-alls in every area of our lives. For some reason they delight in criticizing other people's pursuits while not

contributing anything of their own.

Some of them will say, "you don't need sourdough - that's just a fad during the pandemic." Others will say, "if you're not using sourdough, you're not really baking." In fact, there are many great books that begin with a sourdough starter and every one of their recipes uses that.

To me, sourdough is just one of the available tools we have.

You can make great bread without ever using it. On the other hand, you may want to add some complexity to the flavor of your bread and using a sourdough or a preferment is one technique. Letting the dough sit overnight or longer in your refrigerator is another technique.

Ignore the bullies and choose what appeals to you.

I often use either a levain (sourdough starter) or a fairly liquidy preferment called a poolish along with some yeast. They both handle in much the same way. I sometimes use the more solid type of preferment called a biga. Sometimes I don't use any preferment at all.

My point is that there are so many options and so much to learn. We live in an exciting time where there are a ton of available resources including books, websites, videos, articles...

This book is just one stop along the way.

The Plan

We'll start with batters and move towards doughs that need more careful handling.

I don't expect you to bake every recipe in order, or even at all. I do think it's helpful to read more than just the recipe you want to bake. If there's a recipe you're interested in, perhaps read the chapter that contains it.

Many chapters look at what happens when you take a single recipe and vary the ratio of a single ingredient or the process for combining the ingredients.

This book is a journey. I start with the assumption that you're a smart person who enjoys cooking and experimenting but you are not an experienced bread baker.

When you are done with this book, you'll be able to benefit from books by professional bakers for professional bakers. You will be able to scale their formulas up or down for your needs and adapt their processes for the home baker. You'll be ready for the nuances in their advice and techniques.

If you're interested, you can take our simple English Muffin recipe or you can use one of the dozens you can find online online and decide which direction you'd like to take yours.

So where does this journey begin?

I start the book with a chapter on pancakes.

"Daniel," you say, "that's dumb. This is a bread book. Shouldn't you begin with a bread recipe?"

Maybe.

But starting with pancakes allows us to focus on formulas and mixing ingredients - two skills you'll need for every bread you make. We'll work with formulas and you can see what happens as the percentage of water is increased and decreased.

Pancakes take minutes to mix and make as opposed to bread which can take hours or days.

So we'll start with pancakes.

Once you have some of the basic ideas, we move on to create a sourdough starter if you want one.

While that's bubbling away and maturing we start to play with bread recipes that don't require sourdough.

Hours or Days?

One of the things about baking bread is that the time taken from beginning to end is a long time but the individual parts take no time at all.

In my job I am either traveling or working from home.

When I'm working from home, bread baking is perfect.

I weigh and mix the ingredients for one of my favorite breads in a matter of minutes and then I set it aside to rise while I go do some work.

An hour later, I stand up and head to the kitchen for a cup of tea or coffee. I wash my hands and give the dough a quick fold and take my beverage and return to work.

After another hour I may do this again.

Depending on the recipe, I may cover the dough and place it in the refrigerator overnight or I might shape the dough and let it rise one last time while the oven preheats.

Just a couple minutes of attention each hour or so.

In a real bakery, time is hugely important. The baguette dough must have doubled in precisely this time.

But that's because they're baking hundreds of baguettes followed by so many boules or whatever.

Everything must be ready for the oven on time so that the oven is available for the next type of bread.

At home we can be more casual. When we check on our dough, if it hasn't risen enough, we can give it a little more time before shaping it. Maybe we should move it to a warmer spot. Maybe next time we can use a little more yeast.

Evaluation

As you bake the recipes in this book or any other, you're going to need to make adjustments.

Dough will behave differently in your kitchen than in others. In fact, it will respond differently depending on the temperature in your kitchen and even the humidity. Your oven will bake differently than others. The flour you use will be different at different times.

The good news is that we can take steps to make our baking more consistent and make adjustments when they are needed.

We'll taste our loaves critically and make notes on what to change next time.

When I say "critically" I don't mean that we berate ourselves.

We are all learning.

That wonderful bread you can get from your favorite baker is produced by someone who touches more dough in a week than you'll likely handle in a lifetime.

With all that practice and experience, on top of the years of learning from bakers more experienced than they, of course their loaves are nicely and consistently shaped, the crumb is amazing, and the crust is just perfect.

Professional bakers also know what adjustments to make along the way to get the results they want. You can always check the

techniques index to find where I explain a stage or technique.

We can and will make incredible bread at home. I just want you to remember it's a journey.

Some days the bread won't be so all that you want it to be. Something might go wrong. It may not rise as much as you expect, It will happen less and less as you go on but it will continue to happen now and then.

Maybe you shrug and cut the bread to pan fry in oil and use as croutons. Perhaps you can cut it thick and toast it. Cut the toast in half and toast those newly exposed sides to get a melba toast that you can cover with a dip or spread of some sort.

In any case, it's time to start making things.

I'm going to introduce you to traditional breads as well as to what is currently my favorite bread, the 1 2 3 4 bread, for which the variations are endless.

It will take us a while to get there.

After this introductory chapter, we'll get started with pancakes, muffins, quick bread, and scones.