

Keeping the Tradition Alive: Salt-Rising Bread

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A precious tradition

If you think that “a watched pot never boils,” you should try watching salt-rising bread rise! Whether you have made salt-rising bread or just attempted to make it, you will understand that this is a bread that takes love, dedication, and a bit of luck to make. Thanks goodness that the mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmas who came before us had the patience and perseverance to stick with making salt-rising bread until it worked!

History of salt-rising bread

How it got its name: Some attribute the name, salt-rising bread, to the fact that it rises because of salt-tolerant bacteria present in the starter (although not all recipes use salt). Another theory is that in the days of our foremothers, before gas and electricity, the women would warm rock salt on their wood stoves or in a fireplace, and then place the hot rock salt in a stone crock. They would then set their jar of rising in the crock surrounded by the warm rock salt and leave it overnight. The rock salt stayed warm all night in the crock, thus keeping the rising at an even and warm temperature, so that by morning, the baker’s rising would have foamed and risen, ready now to make into loaves of salt-rising bread!

Thoughts on why salt-rising bread exists:

Salt-rising bread is thought to have originated in the 1830s and 1840s. There are many theories about how salt-rising bread came into existence. One theory is that the pioneer women began making this bread because they could not afford to buy yeast for bread making or perhaps they

were too isolated and did not have easy access to yeast. When they didn’t have “already-made yeast,” they made salt-rising bread. They stirred together water, a little water-ground cornmeal (ground between stones with waterpower), potatoes, and salt. They set the mixture, uncovered, in a warm place, exposing it to the air until bacteria fell into it and formed gas or caused fermentation. Then they removed the potatoes and used the liquid as leavening for this once-famous bread. Baking powder, the standard ingredient used to get dough to rise, was not developed in this country until the 1850s.

Making salt-rising bread

The most important ingredient needed to make salt-rising bread is patience!! This bread takes a long time to make from start to finish, usually overnight for the starter and about six to eight hours the next day.

Besides patience, you will need the usual bread making equipment—three or four bread pans, a jar or small bowl for the starter, a large bowl for the sponge and dough, and lots of flour (and possibly cornmeal, sugar, baking soda, salt, baking powder, or milk—depending on which recipe you use).

Although it is not as authentic as the way our grandmothers made it, salt-rising bread can also be made quite successfully by using a commercially made salt-rising bread “yeast.” It is a mixture of cornmeal, baking soda, a special strain of yeast, nonfat dry milk, and wheat flour. You use this yeast in place of the traditional starter.

Some precautions for making salt-rising bread

Putting it in a warm place: All of the old recipes say “set the rising in a warm place overnight.” A warning—this sounds very easy! It is not so simple! **However, this step is the key to making salt-rising bread successfully.** You must maintain your rising at an even, warm temperature (between 80 and 110 degrees) for 8-14 hours or the rising will not “work.”

Some modern ways of keeping rising warm overnight include the following: setting the rising, covered, on top of a slow-cooking pot filled with water and kept at a low temperature; wrapping the starter in an electric heating pad; or wrapping the starter in a heavy towel and putting it on a warming tray set on medium temperature. Some bakers also have success when they put their starter in their oven with the light kept on.

The smell: Also, be aware that your home will smell **awful** when the rising, or starter has successfully worked! That is OK. It **should** smell bad. In fact, if your rising does not have a bad odor, you should throw it out and start over. Some people have likened the smell to that of old, dirty socks or rotten cheese!

Message from Susan Brown, salt-rising bread enthusiast

When my grandmother died, I deeply wished to carry on a tradition that she had given to me—making salt-rising bread. It is my hope and my desire that by collecting salt-rising bread stories and recipes and passing them on to others (especially those of the younger generation,) this precious piece of our Appalachian heritage will not be lost, and that the unique aroma of salt-rising bread will continue to fill kitchens for many generations to come!

Salt-Rising Bread

1 medium Irish potato, sliced and placed in a jar.

Add:

1 T. cornmeal

1/4 tsp. soda

1/4 tsp. salt

2 cups boiling water

Cover and let rise in warm place until morning. If mixture is foamy and “smellie” the next morning, pour off the liquid and throw away the potatoes.

Mix 2 cups very warm water with 1/2 cup shortening. Then add 1 teaspoon salt, 4 teaspoons sugar, and 5 cups of flour. Combine with rising mixture to make a stiff batter. Let rise until double in bulk. Work in 6 cups of flour to make a soft dough. Divide into 3 portions. Let rise 10 minutes. Knead for 3 minutes. Place in greased pans. Let rise until mixture comes to top of the pan. Bake at 450 degrees F for 15 minutes, then at 400 degrees F for 25 minutes.

Nutrition Information: Based on standard loaf of 16 slices, one slice has 49 calories, 1.3 grams protein, 9 grams carbohydrates, 0.7 grams fat, and 75 milligrams sodium.

References

English Bread and Yeast Cookery by Elizabeth Davis, 1975, Biscuit Books, Inc.
Better Homes and Gardens Heritage Cookbook, 1975, Meredith Corporation

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