

Baguettes à la Julia Child

Makes 4 baguettes

Ingredients

5 cups bread flour, You can include a small amount of whole wheat flour or wheat germ as part of the total amount if you like.

2 cups cool water

1 Tablespoon Instant Dry Yeast, or a small block of fresh yeast

2 1/2 teaspoons Kosher salt

Method

Put the flour and water into the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a dough hook. Mix on low speed for 3-4 minutes. The dough will appear shaggy; this is what you want.

Cover the dough and let it rest for at least 15 minutes. (An hour is better.) This is called the *autolyse*; it's a very important step, as it allows the flour to fully absorb the water.

After the *autolyse*, turn the mixer on low and add the yeast a little at a time. Increase speed to medium and mix for 2 minutes. Return speed to low and add the salt.

Increase speed to medium and knead for about 5 minutes until the dough cleans the side of the bowl.

Remove the dough from the mixing bowl and knead on the counter by hand for a minute to bring the dough together. Form the dough into a tight ball, place it in your container and cover it. Allow the dough to rise on the counter until almost doubled. Depending on the room temperature, this could take anywhere between an hour and a half to three hours.

Alternately, you can refrigerate the dough at this point for up to 24 hours before proceeding further. The dough will continue to rise in the fridge, but much more slowly at the lower temperature. Retarding the dough in this way gives you more flexibility with your baking schedule and it also improves the flavor.

Move the dough to the counter and gently deflate it. If you have refrigerated the dough, allow it to come to room temperature before proceeding.]Divide dough into four equal parts and do a final shaping into long baguettes (instructions follow.) Be careful to shape in a way that disturbs the air bubbles as little as possible.

To shape baguettes, gently flatten each portion of the dough into a 6x8 inch rectangle. Bring the lower rim of the dough (nearest you) to the middle and press with your fingertips to seal. Do this a second time, bringing the folded dough to the top and seal.

Now turn the dough around 180 degrees and fold it in half again, bringing the top down to meet the bottom of the dough (towards you.) Use your thumb to help create a fold along the seam. Press edges firmly together and seal. Allow dough to rest for 5 minutes.

Roll out the dough into a log, about 14 to 16 inches long, tapering the ends. If you feel the dough springing back on you, let it rest another 5 minutes.

Once shaped, baguettes should rest covered in a *couche* or floured towel, **seam side down**, and supported on the sides to maintain their shape.

While the dough is undergoing its final rise, you can prepare the oven. Place a pizza stone on the next to lowest rack of the oven and an empty metal pan on the rack directly underneath it. This pan will hold the water that creates steam during baking.

Preheat the oven to 500 degrees.

The dough is ready for the oven when a finger poked lightly on the surface maintains its shape. This should take about 30 minutes, but **watch the dough, not the clock!**

This is tricky business, because if you over-proof, your dough will not bloom sufficiently in the oven. If it is under-proofed, it may split along the sides while baking. **If you aren't sure, it is generally better to under-proof than to over-proof.**

Transfer the shaped baguettes to a peel, seam side up. If you don't have a peel, you can use the back of a rimless cookie sheet or a flat piece of wood or cardboard. Lining the peel or cookie sheet with parchment paper will prevent sticking.

Slash loaves with nearly vertical, overlapping cuts, using a razor blade or sharp knife.

Load the dough (and parchment paper, if using) directly onto the hot stone. Be sure the loaves are straight, and not touching.

Once the bread is loaded, carefully add about a half cup of cold water into the metal pan on the bottom shelf of the oven to create steam, and immediately close the oven door.

Bake for 20-25 minutes, redistributing the bread once during baking if the loaves appear to be browning unevenly.

When done, the internal temperature of the bread should be 200 degrees, and the bottom should sound hollow when tapped. The top should be a rich, brown color and the slashes should have opened up considerably. **You should wait at least 20 minutes before cutting into the bread.**