

BREAD

This is my beginning. This is where my love of food began. My mother and her mother, Bea Spencer, used to make homemade bread on special occasions. It didn't matter what was going on in the real world, any time bread was being made was a special enough occasion for me! It smelled good as it was rising, it smelled great as it was cooking, and it tasted incredible when I ate it. Sandwiches, toast, croutons, french toast, grilled cheese sandwiches, bread pudding, duck food...you name it and it's better when it's home made.

This recipe is special to me because it has been changed and adapted for 25 years. It is extremely versatile, because you can do so many things with it. You can make a loaf of bread or a dozen dinner rolls. You can make 2 large pizza crusts or six smaller ones. You can make 6 hamburger buns or seven hot dog buns. There are bread sticks, pita breads, bread bowls, whatever you want. Don't be afraid...try it!

3 cups Bread Flour
1 cup warm Water
¼ cup Sugar
1 ½ Tablespoons Butter
1 ½ teaspoons Salt
1 ½ teaspoons dry Yeast (1 envelope)

There are several secrets to success in making bread. First you must understand your yeast. Yeast is a single celled organism that likes to eat sugars and starches. When yeast eats these foods, it gives off gas (carbon dioxide), which makes small air bubbles that causes the bread to rise. The yeast generally comes in a dry powder-like form, and is in suspended animation. To wake it up and make it happy we need to add water. Yeast likes warm water best because it helps it to get going much quicker. If the water is too warm though, you'll kill it. As a rule of thumb, don't use water any hotter than you would bathe a child in.

To begin, place your yeast, 1 cup of warm water, ¼ cup sugar, and 1 cup of bread flour into a large mixing bowl, and stir with a spoon until everything is incorporated. Set a timer for 15 minutes and take a break. This step is called making a sponge. It kick starts your yeast and gets it happier quicker. It also lets you know if you have a bad batch of yeast early in the process before you've gone through all the work of kneading it.

When the time is up, check the batter. You will see some small bubbles forming, and when stirred, it will seem a little lighter. It should have a distinctive yeasty smell of fresh bread.

Add the butter, salt and 1 more cup of flour and mix. If you're doing this by hand, you should be able to do this with a spoon. If using a mixer, use your bread hook attachment and low speed and add the last cup of flour. Knead for 10 minutes. If you're using your hands, add ½ cup of flour, and fold it into the dough. Once it is more or less a sticky ball, place your dough on a well-floured surface, and slowly work in the rest of the flour. To knead, flatten the ball of dough into a disc, fold in half, and push down hard. Turn the dough 90 degrees, fold the dough in half again, and push down hard again. By keeping your surface floured, the flour gets incorporated into your ball that will become firmer and less sticky. The amount of flour required may not be precisely the same every time. If your dough is too soft, add flour 1 Tablespoon at a time. If it is too dry and stiff, add water 1 teaspoon at a time.

So how do you know when you're done? The dough should be tacky, not sticky. When you drop it from your hands, it should drop. The surface of the dough should be smooth and elastic. Place your dough in a lightly greased bowl and roll it around a bit to cover the dough with a thin layer of oil, or rub it lightly with butter to keep it from drying out. Place the dough in a draft free and warm place (not too

hot or you'll kill the yeast/cook it) and cover loosely with plastic wrap. Set your timer for 1 hour and wait, checking occasionally.

When the dough has doubled in size, remove it from the bowl and knead for 2 to 4 minutes. Do not add additional flour or water! Grease your bread pan (cookie sheet, muffin tins, etc.) and form the dough into the desired shape, gently grease the top to avoid drying and put it back in the warm place for approximately 1 - 2 hours or until it is the size you wish.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees, and cook 30 - 35 minutes for a loaf of bread, 15-17 minutes for dinner rolls. The tops should be a rich golden brown. Brush melted butter on the top with a pastry brush to keep it from getting too hard and crusty.