

ULTIMATE BANANA BREAD

Any 10 year old can make the typical dry, bland banana bread. If you want to make a moist, tender loaf with over-the-top banana flavor, you need to think like a mad scientist. This recipe uses 6 bananas, which is about twice as many as a normal recipe...so twice the flavor! It is very important that you use very ripe, heavily speckled bananas for this recipe. As bananas ripen, their starches are converted to sugars. A lightly speckled banana contains about 1.8% fructose, the sweetest sugar in fruit. A heavily speckled banana contains about 5.3% fructose. Use heavily speckled bananas. Black is OK but they do not have an appreciable increase in fructose levels. One of the problems associated with using so many bananas to get maximum flavor is the amount of moisture they add, causing a mushy doughy crumb. That problem is alleviated by microwaving 5 of the bananas to release liquid, then reducing the liquid in a pan to lose moisture but keep flavor. Unconventional? Yes. The best banana bread you have ever had? I'll bet "Yes". This recipe, in large part, comes from America's Test Kitchen.

INGREDIENTS:

1 $\frac{3}{4}$ Cup (8 $\frac{3}{4}$ ounces) unbleached all-purpose Flour
1 teaspoon Baking Soda
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon Salt
6 Large, very ripe Bananas (about 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ pounds)
8 Tablespoons (1 stick) Butter, melted and cooled slightly
2 Large Eggs
 $\frac{3}{4}$ Cup packed (5 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz.) Brown Sugar
1 teaspoon Vanilla Extract
 $\frac{1}{2}$ Cup Walnuts, toasted and coarsely chopped (optional)
2 teaspoons Sugar

DIRECTIONS:

Adjust oven rack to middle position and preheat to 350 degrees.

Spray loaf pan with cooking spray. Whisk flour, baking soda, and salt together in large bowl.

Peel 5 bananas, place in a microwave safe bowl, and cover with plastic wrap. Cut several vents in the wrap with a paring knife. Microwave on high for about 5 minutes or until bananas are soft and have released liquid. Transfer bananas to a fine mesh strainer placed over a medium bowl and allow to drain, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes. (You should have $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of liquid)

Transfer liquid to medium saucepan and cook over medium-high heat until reduced to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, about 5 minutes. Remove pan from heat and stir reduced liquid into bananas and mash with

potato masher (or fork) until fairly smooth. Whisk in melted butter, eggs, brown sugar, and vanilla.

Pour banana mixture into flour mixture and stir until just combined with some streaks of flour remaining. Gently fold in walnuts if you are using them. Scrape batter into prepared loaf pan.

Slice the remaining banana diagonally into $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick slices. Shingle the banana slices on top of either side of the loaf, leaving a $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide space down the center to ensure an even rise. Sprinkle the entire top of the loaf evenly with the sugar.

Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center of the loaf comes out clean, 55-75 minutes. Cool on wire rack for 15 minutes, then remove from pan and continue to cool on wire rack. Serve warm or at room temperature.