

Rustic Italian Bread

2 15-inch, 2½ lb, loaves

Equipment

15 x 15 inch baking stone
15 x 15 inch parchment paper
aluminum foil to make 15 x15 inch sheet
plastic wrap
cast iron skillet
cooling rack
2 large mixing bowls
olive oil to coat bowls
instant-read thermometer

1 hour of prep time
2 days to prepare

Ingredients

Biga		Dough	
½ cup	starter*	4½ cups	Flour (all-purpose or bread)
2½ cups	bread flour	1½ t	instant yeast
¼+ t	instant yeast	3 t	salt
1½ cups	water	2 cups	water
—	flour for kneading	—	flour for kneading

This makes two magnificent loaves of crusty Italian bread. They will be stuck together in the middle, and when you break them apart they'll have that truly old fashioned Italian bakery look. If you don't have a starter you can increase the yeast by a ⅛ teaspoon for the biga, in which case keep it warm about 4-6 hours before refrigerating. The starter gives the bread a fuller, more wheaty taste.

Day 1: the biga

Mix the biga ingredients into a shaggy dough (in mixer or by hand); then, knead approximately 10 minutes until elastic. Cover with plastic wrap. Keep at room temperature a few hours, then refrigerate until ready to begin the dough.

Day 2: the dough

Mix the dough ingredients until they form a rough—not quite a ball. Cover with plastic wrap and let sit 20 minutes.

On the lowest shelf of the oven, put the skillet. On the shelf above, put the baking stone. Turn oven on to the **lowest** setting for a few minutes only—**turn oven off**.

Mix the biga and the dough together. Knead for approximately 10 minutes until elastic.

Divide dough in half and knead each half for a few seconds, then place each ball in a lightly oiled bowl. Cover with plastic wrap and place in oven: the oven should be just warm. (I have put the dough in a very warm oven without ruining things but I left the door open, and the dough doubled in size very quickly, so you will have to watch it.)

Dough will go through 3 risings in the bowls, then one in loaves, before baking.

(It is easy to forget which rising you're on, unless you sit in front of your oven and stare at it. I make a list, starting at this point at the beginning of Rising 1 (if it's 9:00 now): "Rising 1 9:45, Rising 2 10:30, Rising 3 11:45, Rising 4 12:45 Baking 1:00." Set a timer (keep it with you), cross out what rising has just ended, and enjoy the day.)

Rising 1

45+ minutes, dough may not be twice the size.

Turn the dough (do not punch down):

- with a plastic scraper or the end of a spatula, tuck the end under the outside edge of the dough and pull toward the center (right side to the center).
- Repeat from the opposite side (left side to the center)
- Repeat from the top toward the center

(The dough should end up in a rough square.)

Put back in oven.

Rising 2

45+ minutes, dough will be twice the size

Turn the dough as above.

Return to oven.

Rising 3

45+ minutes, dough will be twice the size or more

Turn dough as above.

Return to oven.

Rising 4

Remove dough from oven and form each loaf, one at a time:

Gently scrape and invert onto a well dusted surface. Dust your hands and the dough with flour. Gently form the dough into a 10 inch wide x 8 inch high square. Fold the top right corner in toward the center. Turn the top left corner in toward the center. Then roll the dough from the top (pointed edge) toward the bottom 10 inch edge. Roll the dough onto the seam side down. Transfer to one side of a lightly floured parchment sheet, and gently form the dough into a football-shaped loaf by tucking bottom edges underneath the loaf.

Repeat with the second ball of dough.

Place the skillet on the bottom of your oven. Turn the oven on to 500° F (260° C)

Dust the loaves with flour and cover with plastic wrap.

Let loaves rise until double in size, about 1 hour.

To Bake:

Boil 2 cups of water.

With a razor blade, lame, or sharp chef's knife, cut a ½ inch deep along the top of each loaf, starting and ending about 1 ½ inch in from each end.

Using a large peel or the back of baking sheet, transfer loaves on the parchment sheet to the hot baking stone.

Carefully pour boiling water into the very hot skillet. If you have pulled the shelf out, push it in very carefully.

(Optional—based on your oven, you may need to put aluminum foil over the loaves. After 10 minutes the loaves should be a light gold on top. In my oven I put the foil lightly over them when I put the loaves in, or when I turn the oven down after 10 minutes.)

Bake 10 minutes.

Reduce oven temperature to 400° and quickly spin the loaves around using the edges of the parchment.

Bake until loaves are a deep golden brown, about 35 minutes. The internal temperature of the loaves should be 200° to 210°F (94°-100°C).

Transfer loaves to wire racks to cool, about 2 hours. (You can cheat and cut a slice sooner, but the bread's flavor develops as it cools.)

*Starter: For advise great advice go to <http://www.sourdoughhome.com/index.html>. Most people are scared of starters, and starters often take about as much work as having cat around the house. Here is the good news—I keep about 1 cup of starter in the refrigerator. I take out ½ cup for this recipe at the time I need it. (I don't prepare anything, or take it out the night before). To replace what I've taken out, I add back a heavy ½ cup of flour and light ½ cup of water, stir until smooth, cover and put back in to the refrigerator. That's not much work.

Enjoy
Walton