

Bakery-worthy Yeast Breads

Many people love the idea of warm, fresh bread but never try baking it because it seems time-consuming or complicated. Here are key tips that walk you through the steps and yield a fragrant loaf of bread.

Yeast is a living organism. It needs food and moisture to thrive. Yeast feeds on sugars and starches in the dough. When it grows, it produces carbon dioxide that is responsible for stretching and expanding the dough as it rises.

Dry yeast is dormant and can be stored unopened at room temperature. Once the package is opened, the yeast must be refrigerated or frozen in an airtight container. It requires liquid to “wake” the yeast from its dormant state. Be sure to check the expiration date before baking. One ¼-ounce packet of dry yeast equals 2 1/4 teaspoons.

There are four main types of yeast you can use for bread baking:

1. Active dry yeast must be “activated” by dissolving the granules in warm water. It is suitable for recipes that require more than one rise or cold-proofed dough.
2. Instant yeast can be added directly to the recipe since it will readily dissolve in the dough’s moisture due to its small grain size, eliminating the need for rehydration. It’s suitable for recipes requiring more than one rise or cold-proofed dough.
3. As a subcategory of instant yeast, fast-acting yeasts are formulated to operate on an accelerated timetable and are designed to work with only one rise.
4. Bread machine yeast is designed for use in recipes formulated for bread machines.

Active dry and instant yeast can be used interchangeably in recipes (1:1); however, keep an eye on the dough so it doesn’t rise too much.

Using high-quality flour is key to yeast-baking success. Whole wheat flour, white whole wheat flour, bread flour, or all-purpose flour are all good choices. Bread flour is a high-protein flour that gives chewy, bakery-style artisan bread results.

For best results, measure flour carefully. For best accuracy, use a scale.

Varying the amount of liquid in a yeast recipe significantly affects texture. Generally, the drier and stiffer the dough, the denser and drier the loaf. Loaves made with softer dough are usually moister, higher rising, and exhibit a more open texture.

Salt prevents yeast from growing too quickly. The dough risks rising too quickly without salt and collapsing as it bakes.

Most baked goods using yeast require kneading the dough before shaping and baking. There are some no-knead recipes. When wheat flour and water are kneaded, the proteins in the flour combine to develop a gluten network. This structure gives bread dough the strength and elasticity to capture all the gases produced by yeast, which gives baked goods their structure and texture. The dough can be kneaded by hand, with a stand mixer, or in a bread machine.

Kneading dough is simply pushing the dough away from you with the heel of your hand, lifting the edge of the dough that's farthest away from you, and folding the dough in half toward you. Rotate the dough a quarter turn. Repeat folding and pressing the dough with alternating hands until the dough is smooth, firm, elastic, and shiny.

Give that ball of dough a firm poke with your finger. If the indentation fills back quickly, the dough is properly kneaded. If it stays looking like a deep dimple, continue kneading.

If you're using a stand mixer or bread machine, the dough should eventually clear the sides of the mixing bowl.

Once the dough has been kneaded, it's ready to rise. Yeast dough is considered ripe when it has risen enough – usually doubling in size.

The dough has risen enough when a dent can be made in the dough with two fingers, and it does not fill up again quickly. If the indentations remain, the dough is ripe and ready for punch down. If not, cover and let the dough rise longer. Repeat the test.

After shaping, most breads need a second rise to regain the air lost during shaping. For the second test, touch the side of the dough lightly with your fingertip. If the indentation remains, the dough is ripe and ready for the oven.

Bread should be cooled at room temperature. Once it has cooled, it should be wrapped in plastic wrap, foil, or put in an airtight plastic baggie. Store yeast bread at room temperature for up to two days.

For cutting fresh bread, heat the knife in hot water, wipe dry, and slice the loaf of bread on its side.

If you're ready to take your bread baking up a notch, following the techniques and process will significantly impact your bread quality.