



Rustic Red Fife Whole Grain Bread

This recipe is not for the faint of heart but rather the die-hard Artisan baker. It involves time and commitment but the results are well worth the effort.

This method is recommended for all whole grain breads to achieve “the full potential of flavor trapped in whole grain.” It does this by creating conditions favorable to enzymatic activity (and essential for flavor development in whole grain breads) with the parallel creation of two small dough, or preferment, and delayed fermentation techniques. First, a firm starter dough (which is called a “soaker”) of flour, water and salt, but no yeast, is mixed together and rests at room temperature for 24 hours. Once moist, enzymes in the soaker-starter become active; hastening the conversion of amylase, a starch closely associated with flavor, to amylose, a sugar. This conversion sweetens the grain mixture prior to baking and produces other enzymatic compounds that promote flavor development during the baking process itself.

In conjunction with the soaker, a second firm dough is made, this one containing flour, water and a small amount of yeast, and refrigerates it for 24 hours—a process that allows fermentation flavors to develop, but prevents the yeast from dying of exhaustion. Longer fermentation times—required to get under-yeasted dough up to speed—signal a complex set of enzymatic activities at work in the dough. In dough with minimal yeast, the yeast depletes available sugars in the flour after a couple of hours and is forced to seek fresh sustenance by converting damaged starches (produced in the milling process) to sugars. The longer it takes a dough to rise, the more interesting the fermentation flavors become—and the more interesting the flavor of the bread itself.

On the second day the two type of dough are combined, given a fresh infusion of yeast, a bit of flour and some salt, and mixed or kneaded like regular bread dough. The activated enzymes in each give the final dough a big jump in terms of flavor and an extra lift when the bread hits the oven. It is a technique that produces a phenomenal loaf of whole grain bread: moist, richly flavored, and nicely lofted with a deep, crisp-chewy crust.

Equipment Preparation:

For this recipe, you will need a digital scale; two small mixing bowls; a stand mixer with a dough hook attachment; a plastic dough scraper or large rubber spatula; an 8-inch Brotform proofing basket or home-fabricated proofing basket described in Baking Remarks; parchment paper; a pizza stone; a pizza peel or baking sheet; a clean unglazed terra cotta pot about 10 inches in diameter, its bottom hole plugged with foil; long oven mitts; a baker’s lame or single-edged razor blade; an instant-read thermometer; and a cooling rack.

Ingredients:

Makes one 1 1/2-pound loaf





For the unleavened preferment:

8 oz. (1 cup plus 7 Tbsp.) Red Fife Flour
1/2 tsp. fine sea salt
5 oz. (about 2/3 cup) spring or filtered water, warm (about 105°)

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For the final dough:

3/4 tsp. instant yeast
2 tsp. honey or agave nectar
2 Tbsp. olive oil
5/8 tsp. fine sea salt
1/4 cup Red Fife Flour

Procedure:

Make the unleavened preferment: Mix the flour and salt in a small bowl. Pour in the water and stir the ingredients with your fingertips or a wooden spoon until they form shaggy dough. Knead the dough by hand in the bowl, wiping the sides of the bowl with the dough ball to clean them, then turn the ball out onto the countertop. Knead the dough about 2 minutes more; it will be smooth and tacky. Return the dough to the bowl, cover it loosely with plastic wrap and let it stand at room temperature for 24 hours.

Make the leavened preferment: Mix the flour and yeast in a small bowl. Pour in the water and stir the ingredients with your fingertips or a wooden spoon until they form shaggy dough. Knead the dough by hand in the bowl, wiping the sides of the bowl with the dough ball to clean them, then turn the ball out onto the countertop. Knead the dough until smooth and strong, about 5 minutes. Return the dough to the bowl, cover it loosely with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 24 hours. Note: The two preferments look like identical twins.

Make the dough: After 24 hours, the unleavened preferment will smell sweet and look slightly sweaty from sitting up all night, but will not differ much visually from the day before. The leavened preferment, on the other hand, will look about 6 months pregnant. Remove the leavened preferment from the refrigerator and let it stand at room temperature for 2 hours before mixing the final dough.

After 2 hours, combine both preferments in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook attachment. Add the yeast, honey or agave, olive oil and salt and mix on low speed until no yeast granules are visible and the dough is smooth and sinewy, about 5 minutes. Add the remaining flour and continue to knead the dough on medium speed until it is strong and a small piece of it can be gently





stretched with the fingers into a see-through gluten window, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove the bowl from the mixer. Wet your hands, pull the dough from the bowl and off the dough hook, and throw it on the counter. If the dough feels stubbornly taut, wet your hands and knead it progressively 2 or 3 times until to hydrate the dough. Return the dough to the bowl. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the dough rise at room temperature until it doubles in size and looks spongy and pocked, about 2 hours 45 minutes.

Adjust an oven rack to the lowest position; remove any additional racks. Place a pizza stone on the rack and set a large, clean terra cotta pot on the stone (don't forget to first plug the hole in the pot with a small ball of aluminum foil). Heat the oven to 500°.

Shape the dough: Using a plastic dough scraper or large rubber spatula, gently ease the risen dough from the bowl onto the countertop, leaving as much air in the dough as possible. Shape the dough into a rough ball. Cup both hands around the sides of the ball and drag its bottom against the counter, using friction to stretch and tighten the dough into a smooth, round ball. Turn the dough ball smooth-side down into a floured 8-inch brotform or home-fabricated 1 1/2-quart proofing basket. Wet your fingers and pinch the seams of the dough to seal them (View photo). Brush the top of the dough with oil, then drape plastic wrap lightly over the basket and let the dough rise at room temperature until it appears light and airy and has risen close to the top of the brotform or bowl, about 1 hour 15 minutes.

Bake the bread: Gently invert the brotform with the risen dough over a parchment paper-lined pizza peel or inverted baking sheet. Lift the basket off the dough. Using a baker's lame or single-edged razor blade, slash an X into the top of the dough. Wearing long oven mitts quickly pull the oven rack halfway out and transfer the pot from the stone to the open oven door. Slide the dough and its parchment from the pizza peel onto the stone and invert the pot immediately over the dough. Slide the rack back in, close the oven door, and reduce the heat to 450°. Bake for 20 minutes. Remove the pot and continue to bake the bread until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the center of the loaf registers 190 to 200°, about 5 minutes longer. The bread should be nicely risen and a dark russet brown. Using potholders transfer the bread from the oven to a wire rack and let cool to room temperature.

