

Amy's Bread

Amy Scherber

Rustic Italian Bread

At Amy's Bread we make crusty rectangles of Rustic Italian bread in two sizes. This white bread with an airy open crumb is our version of ciabatta. This is very wet dough that develops much of its strength and elasticity while it proofs in the bowl after being mixed. It takes practice to get used to handling and shaping dough this wet but with a little persistence you'll soon be an expert and will want to use this recipe again and again.

Yield: two large 1[1/2] Lb. ciabatta-shaped loaves

Ingredients	Grams	Ounces	Volume
Very warm water (105° F to 115° F)	57	2.0	[1/4] cup
Active dry yeast	1 tsp.	1 tsp.	1 tsp.
Poolish Starter (see last page)	454	16.0	1[7/8] cups
Cold water (65° F)	365	12.87	1[2/3] cups
Unbleached bread flour	605	21.34	4 cups
Kosher salt	13	.46	1 Tbs. + 2[1/4] tsp.

Equipment: baking stone and wooden peel, one 12 x 17-inch sheet pan

1. Combine the very warm water and the yeast in a measuring cup and stir to dissolve the yeast. Let stand for 3 minutes. In a large mixing bowl, combine the poolish, water and yeast mixture and break up the poolish with your fingers. Add the flour and salt and mix with your fingers to moisten the flour. When all of the flour is incorporated, move the dough to a lightly floured work surface and knead for 4 minutes using a dough scraper to lift and turn the dough. The dough should look like a very thick batter, should be very sticky, and will not look smooth. If the dough feels firm or dry, knead in additional cool water a tablespoon at a time.

2. Put the dough back into the mixing bowl, cover with oiled plastic, and let rest for 15 minutes to smooth out and develop elasticity. Return the dough to the lightly floured surface and knead it for 6-8 minutes, lifting and scraping it up with a dough scraper. The dough will already feel stretchy, but will become smooth and develop strength with kneading. Do not knead extra flour into the dough. It should have some strength and

elasticity but it will still be soft and sticky and you will not be able to pull a transparent sheet without having it tear. The dough temperature should be around 77° F.

3. Put the dough in an oiled bowl that is large enough to allow it to almost double, cover it with oiled plastic wrap, and allow it to rise for 1 hour. It should feel puffy but it will not have doubled. Gently fold the dough in from the sides to the middle to degas it, turn it over so the smoother bottom side is up, cover it and let it rise again for 45 to 50 minutes. The dough will almost double during this second rest and it should feel strong and supple by the end of the time period.

4. While the dough rests, prepare a proofing pan for the loaves by lining a 12 x 17-inch sheet pan with baker's linen so it overlaps the sides and sprinkle it with a generous amount of flour; or just line the pan with baking parchment and sprinkle the parchment with a moderate amount of flour.

5. Turn the dough gently out onto a well floured work surface. By pulling and patting gently with your hands, shape the dough into a big rectangular pillow, about 16 by 9 inches, with the long sides at the top and bottom. Try not to deflate the dough too much. Using a dough scraper, cut the rectangle in half from top to bottom, so you have two 8 by 12-inch pieces, with the short sides at the top and bottom. **Ciabatta:** At this point the two rectangles of dough could be coated with flour and placed on the floured cloth to rise briefly before being turned over and baked to make a rustic ciabatta. Baking them when they're slightly under proofed guarantees more oven spring which contributes to a more open, airy crumb in the finished loaf.

6. While the loaves are rising, prepare the oven for baking bread by placing a shallow cast iron pan (like a skillet) and a small bread pan (a mini pan works well) on the floor of the oven. If you're using an electric oven, you'll have to put them on an oven rack that is positioned on the lowest possible rung. Place an oven rack two rungs above the cast iron pan, and put a baking stone on it if you have one. Fill the spray bottle with water. Fill a tea kettle with water to be boiled later, and have a metal 1-cup measure with a straight handle on it available near the kettle. At least 30 minutes before the loaves are ready to bake, preheat the oven to 480° F.

7. About 5 or 10 minutes before the loaves are ready to go into the oven, sprinkle the wooden peel with coarse cornmeal and gently lift each loaf from the proofing pan, turn it over so the bottom becomes the top, and place it onto the peel. The easiest way to do this is to put one hand under each end of the loaf and gently scoot them in toward the center of the loaf so that it will be supported during the move. Try not to stretch the loaves and leave enough space between the two loaves to allow for spreading in the oven. Cover them again with the oiled plastic wrap. Turn the water on to boil, and carefully place 2 ice cubes in the small bread pan in the bottom of the oven. This helps to create moisture in the oven prior to baking.

8. When the loaves are ready, the ciabatta does not need to be scored. Use the plastic water bottle to mist the loaves lightly with water. Quickly but carefully fill the metal 1-

cup measure with boiling water, open the oven and slide the loaves onto the baking stone, being mindful not to stretch them too much, then quickly (but carefully) pour the boiling water into the cast iron pan and immediately close the oven door. (If you're baking without a stone simply slide the sheet pan with the misted loaves onto the empty oven rack.) After 3 minutes, pour in another [1/2] cup of boiling water. Check the loaves after 20 minutes and rotate them if necessary to insure even browning. Bake them for a total of 45 to 50 minutes or until they are uniformly dark golden brown in color and sound hollow when tapped on the bottom. Cool them completely on a wire rack before cutting them.

Tips and Techniques

We used unbleached bread flour with a protein content of 12% for this dough. If the dough is still weak and not fully developed at the end of step 4 in the recipe, degas it and turn it again. Let it rise for 30 minutes or more until it has almost doubled. Check it again to see if you can pull a transparent sheet. It should be ready to divide at the end of that third turn.

Polish (Starter for the dough)

Polish has become our favorite starter in the bakery. We enjoy using it because it gives our bread a moist, open-holed crumb, a chewy texture, and a sweet, pleasant flavor of fermentation without any sourness.

Don't be discouraged by the process of making a starter. Polish is very easy to make and adds so much character to breads like French Baguettes and Rustic Italian Bread. It's made from the tiniest bit of yeast we can measure, combined with equal weights of water and flour. The mixing takes about 3 minutes, and the rest of the work is done by the yeast which slowly ferments with the flour and water. The polish should be mixed 6 to 24 hours before you plan to make your bread. When used in your dough, the final result will be sophisticated bread that makes you look like a professional baker.

Yield: 454 grams/16 ounces/2[1/4] cups of starter

Ingredients	Grams	Ounces	Volume
Active dry yeast	[1/4] tsp.	[1/4] tsp.	[1/4] tsp.
Very warm water (105[dg] to 115[dg] F)	57	2	[1/4] cup
Cool water (76[dg] to 78[dg] F)	170	6	[3/4] cup
Unbleached all purpose flour	227	8	1[1/2] cups + 2 Tbs.

Equipment: one clear 2-quart plastic or glass container with high sides

1. In a clear 2-quart plastic or glass container with high sides, add the yeast and the very warm water and whisk together until the yeast has dissolved. Allow the mixture to stand for 3 minutes. Add the cool water and the flour and stir vigorously with a wooden spoon or your hand for 1 minute, until a smooth, somewhat elastic batter has formed. The starter will be thick and stretchy. It gets softer and thinner after it has risen.

2. Scrape the starter from the sides of the container and cover it with plastic film. Mark the height of the starter and the time on a piece of tape on the side of the container so you can see how much it rises. Make sure it has room to triple in volume.
3. Let it rise at room temperature for 6-8 hours until ready to use. Or let it rise one hour at room temperature, then chill it in the refrigerator for at least 8 hours or overnight. Remove it from the refrigerator and let it sit at room temperature for 3 to 4 hours to warm up and become active before using it. When it is ready it will have tripled in volume, and lots of bubbles and small folds will appear on top of the surface of the starter. The starter should be used in the next two to four hours before it begins to deflate. If you use the starter while it's still cold from the refrigerator, be sure to compensate for the cold temperature by using warm water (85°F to 90°F) in your dough, instead of the cool water specified in the recipe.

Tips and Techniques

Take the temperature of your water with a stem thermometer before adding it to the yeast. If the water is too hot it will damage the yeast, and if it is too cool, it will take much longer to activate and will rise very slowly, if at all.