Homemade French Bread

THE ZAMZOWS TABLE

A couple of years ago, there was a very popular trend to make homemade sourdough. I can admit that I was very interested in trying it on my own. I started looking into it and quickly realized that it wasn't for me. However, I still wanted to have homemade bread in my repertoire. I noticed that I bought French bread from the store a couple of times a week. After checking out a few recipes, I settled on one, and now my house has fresh homemade French Bread a couple of times a month.

Ingredients

- 2 1/4 cups warm water (try to be precise)
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon active dry yeast
- 2 1/4 teaspoons salt
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 5 1/2 - 6 cups flour

Directions

1. In the bowl of your stand mixer, add water, active yeast, and sugar. Mix slowly with your dough hook for a few seconds. Allow the yeast to begin bubbling and foaming slightly; this usually takes three or four minutes.
2. Add the oil and begin to mix slowly, adding three cups of flour. Add the salt.
3. As the flour mixes, slowly add more flour about half a cup at a time until you have added a total of 5 1/2 cups. The dough should clean up the sides of the bowl as it mixes. Add up to another half cup of flour if it is still sticky. The dough should begin to form a small ball and clean the side of the bowl.

4. Once all the flour you need has been added, let the dough hook knead the ball for a few seconds. Prepare a clean space on your counter with some flour. Remove the dough to your counter with flour. Add a little flour to the top of the ball and begin to knead the dough. I usually knead for about 5 minutes, adding a little more flour if I encounter sticky bits. Over the years, I have found this part takes the most practice to know when it's ready. I find that when the dough begins to tighten up just a bit, it is ready to proof.

5. Clean your mixing bowl and coat the bowl with a small amount of olive oil. Transfer your dough back to the bowl and cover it with a towel. Let the dough proof for about an hour until it has doubled in size.

6. Line a large baking tray with parchment paper. Remove the dough and split it into two. Flatten each half into about a 9x13-inch rectangle. Roll the dough from one long end up to the other, removing any bubbles. Pinch together the rolled edges. I like to slightly roll the rounded edges underneath so that you have a nicely formed loaf. Repeat with the other half of the dough. Arrange on the baking tray and, using a lame or sharp knife, make three to four light diagonal cuts along the top of each loaf. Cover with your towel and allow it to proof for another hour.

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7. When about ready to bake, preheat your oven to 375 degrees. Remove the towel and put your loaves in the middle rack of the oven. Throw three or four ice cubes into the bottom of the oven and close the door.

8. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes until the loaves turn a golden brown. Remove from the oven and allow them to cool.

Baking bread is one of my favorite weekend activities. Once the chores are all done, I'll make some bread, filling the house with the beautifully sweet aroma of fresh bread. There is really nothing else like it. As soon as the bread is easy to touch, the entire family comes to get a warm slice with some butter. It is so tasty and warm and truly feeds your soul.