

Inside the Jewish Bakery: Rye & Other Breads

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From “Rye Bread”



Black rye bread.
(Courtesy of Allan Whitaker)

Black Bread

Black bread (*razeve broyt*) formed the mainstay of the Yiddish diet and remained a popular Jewish bakery product in the U.S. until World War II. This recipe is adapted from a century-old Polish formula that was translated into English and posted on the Australian website Sourdough Companion (www.sourdough.com). It parallels very closely Hirsz Abramowicz's description of rye bread baking in Lithuania. The dark rye flour produces a dense, hearty bread that offers a taste and texture rarely found in America. This bread tastes best when left to stand for a day or two before eating—if you can wait that long—and it goes incredibly well with strong cheeses and smoked or salted meats and fish.

Makes one 42 oz./1.20 kg. loaf or two 21 oz./600 g. loaves

Day 1:

INGREDIENT: Rye sour

VOLUME: 1 Tbs.

OUNCES: 1.3

GRAMS: 35

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 4%

INGREDIENT: Warm (90° F./32° C.) water

VOLUME: ¼ cup + 2 Tbs.

OUNCES: 3.0

GRAMS: 85

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 15%

INGREDIENT: Dark rye flour

VOLUME: ½ cup

OUNCES: 2.0

GRAMS: 55

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 10%

1. In a glass, plastic, porcelain or stainless-steel bowl, dissolve the sour culture in the water and mix with rye flour to form a moderately firm dough. Let stand for 5 to 6 hours, until the dough doubles in bulk and shows bubbles when you scratch the surface. It will have a fresh, sour smell.

2. About 4 hours after you mix the dough, combine in a separate bowl:

INGREDIENT: Boiling water

VOLUME: 2¼ cups

OUNCES: 18.0

GRAMS: 510

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 80%

INGREDIENT: Dark rye flour

VOLUME: 1½ cups

OUNCES: 5.3

GRAMS: 150

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 30%

INGREDIENT: Coarse rye meal

VOLUME: ¾ cup + 2 Tbs.

OUNCES: 5.3

GRAMS: 150

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 30%

3. Set the mixture aside and let cool until it feels warm to the touch. Combine with the sour mixture into a moderately stiff, deep-brown dough.

4. Cover and let ferment in a warm, dark place for 4 to 5 hours, until it has grown by about 50 percent. It will have a clean, sour smell and show large bubbles under the surface. Refrigerate overnight.

Day 2:

5. Remove the sour mixture from the refrigerator and transfer to a large mixing bowl or the bowl of a stand mixer. Knead with wet hands or paddle mixer to degas, then add:

INGREDIENT: Dark rye flour

VOLUME: 1½ cups

OUNCES: 5.3

GRAMS: 150

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 30.0%

INGREDIENT: Salt

VOLUME: 1½ tsp.

OUNCES: 0.3

GRAMS: 9

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 2.0%

INGREDIENT: Instant yeast

VOLUME: ½ tsp.

OUNCES: 0.1

GRAMS: 3

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE: 0.5%

6. Add the salt and flour to the sponge, using hands or the paddle mixer, until the dough is smooth and evenly blended, then sprinkle in instant yeast. Since there's no gluten to develop, this should take about 10 minutes by hand and 5 to 6 minutes if you're using a stand mixer.
7. Use a steam pan and preheat your oven to 475° F./250° C. Form the dough into either a round or oblong loaf and set on a peel that has been heavily sprinkled with cornmeal, or, alternatively, on a sheet of baking parchment set on the bottom of an upside-down baking sheet. If you don't have a baking stone or prefer a rectangular loaf, divide the dough into two pieces and place in well-oiled (8½ x 4½ in./21 x 11 cm.) loaf pans. Cover with a dampened tea towel and proof for 60 to 90 minutes, until the loaf is well-risen and the first cracks show on the surface.
8. At bake time, put 1 cup/8 oz./225 ml. of boiling water in the steam pan, brush the loaf well with water and slash or dock it by pressing a fingertip about half an inch into the top. Slide the loaf onto your baking stone. Add another cup of boiling water after 3 minutes and again at 6 minutes in order to get as much steam as possible in the first 10 minutes for maximum oven spring.
9. After 15 minutes, turn the heat down to 225° F./105° C. and bake for an additional 2 to 2 ½ hours. When done, place the bread on a rack to cool and immediately brush the crust generously with boiling water. Allow to stand for at least 48 hours to stabilize the loaves before cutting.