

Things I've Learned About Dutch Oven Bread That You Won't Find in the Recipe

Over the past year, I've learned some things about bread making. And along the way, I assumed that these were things that everybody knew, and I had just been the slow one. I didn't really talk about it much with people, because I assumed that they'd just say, "Well, duh, when did you figure THAT one out?"

But I discovered that most dutch oven chefs also didn't know a lot of the things I was learning, so I started to come out of my shell and share.

So, here are the things I've learned about baking yeast bread in a dutch oven:

* The Recipe is Only Half What You Need

Baking good bread is half ingredients, and half technique. It's as important to learn how to combine the ingredients and what to do with them as it is what ingredients to combine. This is where so many simple recipes fail you.

* Enrichments are great, but not always necessary

Really, all you absolutely need to make bread are four basic ingredients: Flour, salt, yeast, and water. If you can do it with those, you can do it with anything else you wanna add. I've learned that with just those ingredients, you can make a very fluffy and tasty bread!

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* You Need to Knead

Kneading is not only a great way to mix in the right amount of flour, it also develops the gluten strands and makes it so that the bread can trap the gas that the yeast makes. That makes the bread rise. For so long, I would be frustrated that my bread wasn't rising. It would take FOREVER. I didn't know what was wrong with me. I'd knead the bread as long as the recipe said to, so why wasn't it working?

Just like different flours absorb water differently, they also take varying amounts of kneading. You can't definitively say, "knead for 8 minutes" and know that it'll be enough. You need to do the "Windowpane Test". That's the only way to know.

Cut off a small piece of the dough you're kneading. Roll it into a ball in your palms. Then, working it in a circle, begin to stretch it out flat in the air. Pull it evenly apart, like you're stretching out a pizza dough. Keep stretching it thinner and thinner. Watch how long it takes to tear. If you can stretch it out so thin it becomes translucent, like a window pane, without it tearing, then you've kneaded it enough. If not, put that piece back in the dough ball and keep kneading.

* Pre-Heat the Oven

It turns out that when you shove a ball of dough into an already heated oven, that initial blast of heat will make the dough "spring". The trapped gas expands, the moisture in the dough turns to steam, and the whole ball just poofs. You get a bigger loaf, with a softer crumb.

One simple method is to pre-heat the lid of the dutch oven. After your bread has risen and you've shaped it, put it in an

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oiled dutch oven to proof. In the meantime, put some (a lot) of coals on the lid and set it aside. When the loaf is ready, take some of the coals off the lid and put them in a ring. Set the dutch oven on the ring of coals, and put the lid on. The advantage of this method is that you're not handling the bread much, and so there's less of a chance of punching it down as you're trying to maneuver it into a hot dutch oven. You can also do some fun shapes, like braids and rings. It's much easier to do rolls this way, too.

* Use a Thermometer

It can be difficult to strictly regulate the internal temperature of a dutch oven. Counting coals is a good idea, but if it's cold out, or windy, or any of a number of factors, the heat can vary. That means, I'm never sure when it's done. Cooking a certain length of time is no guarantee. Looking at the "golden brown" of the crust doesn't work, because I can never tell if it's done inside. In a dutch oven, it's not always practical to reach in, lift out the loaf and thump it.

My solution? Stick a meat thermometer in it. If it's between 180 and 200, it's done. 180 for the lighter types of breads, 200 for heavier breads.

So, there you have my ideas on making breads in a dutch oven. Follow the recipe, and follow these hints, and you'll do better than you did before, I can almost guarantee!

Mark Hansen

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