

The Master Recipe: Boule (Artisan Free-Form Loaf)

“Artisan Bread in Five Minutes a Day: The Discovery That Revolutionizes Home Baking,” by Jeff Hertzberg M.D., Zoë François

Makes four 1-pound loaves. The recipe is easily doubled or halved.

3 cups lukewarm water

1 1/2 tablespoons granulated yeast (2 packets)

1 1/2 tablespoons kosher salt or other coarse salt

6 1/2 cups unsifted, unbleached, all-purpose white flour, measured with the scoop-and-sweep method

Cornmeal for pizza peel

1. Warm the water slightly: It should feel just a little warmer than body temperature, about 100 degrees F. Warm water will rise the dough to the right point for storage in about 2 hours. You can use cold tap water and get an identical final result; then the first rising will take 3 or even 4 hours. That won't be too great a difference, as you will only be doing this once per stored batch.
2. Add yeast and salt to the water in a 5-quart bowl or, preferably, in a resealable, lidded (not airtight) plastic food container or food-grade bucket. Don't worry about getting it all to dissolve.
3. Mix in the flour—kneading is unnecessary: Add all of the flour at once, measuring it in with dry-ingredient measuring cups, by gently scooping up flour, then sweeping the top level with a knife or spatula; don't press down into the flour as you scoop or you'll throw off the measurement by compressing. Mix with a wooden spoon, a high-capacity food processor (14 cups or larger) fitted with the dough attachment, or a heavy-duty stand mixer fitted with the dough hook until the mixture is uniform. If you're hand-mixing and it becomes too difficult to incorporate all the flour with the spoon, you can reach into your mixing vessel with very wet hands and press the mixture together. Don't knead. It isn't necessary. You're finished when everything is uniformly moist, without dry patches. This step is done in a matter of minutes, and will yield a dough that is wet and loose enough to conform to the shape of its container.
4. Allow to rise: Cover with a lid (not airtight) that fits well to the container you're using. Do not use screw-topped bottles or Mason jars, which could explode from the trapped gases. Lidded plastic buckets designed for dough storage are readily available. Allow the mixture to rise at room temperature until it begins to collapse (or at least flattens on the top), approximately 2 hours, depending on the room's temperature and the initial water temperature. Longer rising times, up to about 5 hours, will not harm the result. You can use a portion of the dough any time after this period. Fully refrigerated wet dough is less sticky and is easier to work with than dough at room temperature. So, the first time you try our method, it's best to refrigerate the dough overnight (or at least 3 hours), before shaping a loaf.
5. On Baking Day: The gluten cloak: don't knead, just “cloak” and shape a loaf in 30 to 60 seconds. First, prepare a pizza peel by sprinkling it liberally with cornmeal (or whatever your recipe calls for) to prevent your loaf from sticking to it when you slide it into the oven. Sprinkle the surface of your refrigerated dough with flour. Pull up and cut off a 1-pound (grapefruit-size) piece of dough, using a serrated knife. Hold the mass of dough in your hands and add a little more flour as needed so it won't stick to your hands. Gently stretch the surface of the dough around to the bottom on all four sides,

rotating the ball a quarter-turn as you go. Most of the dusting flour will fall off; it's not intended to be incorporated into the dough. The bottom of the loaf may appear to be a collection of bunched ends, but it will flatten out and adhere during resting and baking. The correctly shaped final product will be smooth and cohesive. The entire process should take no more than 30 to 60 seconds

6. Rest the loaf and let it rise on a pizza peel: Place the shaped ball on the cornmeal-covered pizza peel. Allow the loaf to rest on the peel for about 40 minutes (it doesn't need to be covered during the rest period). Depending on the age of the dough, you may not see much rise during this period; more rising will occur during baking ("oven spring").
7. Twenty minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 450°F, with a baking stone placed on the middle rack. Place an empty broiler tray for holding water on any other shelf that won't interfere with the rising bread.
8. Dust and slash: Unless otherwise indicated in a specific recipe, dust the top of the loaf liberally with flour, which will allow the slashing knife to pass without sticking. Slash a 1/4-inch-deep cross, "scallop," or tic-tac-toe pattern into the top, using a serrated bread knife
9. Baking with steam: After a 20-minute preheat, you're ready to bake, even though your oven thermometer won't yet be up to full temperature. With a quick forward jerking motion of the wrist, slide the loaf off the pizza peel and onto the preheated baking stone. Quickly but carefully pour about 1 cup of hot water from the tap into the broiler tray and close the oven door to trap the steam. Bake for about 30 minutes, or until the crust is nicely browned and firm to the touch. Because you've used wet dough, there is little risk of drying out the interior, despite the dark crust. When you remove the loaf from the oven, it will audibly crackle, or "sing," when initially exposed to room temperature air. Allow to cool completely, preferably on a wire cooling rack, for best flavor, texture, and slicing. The perfect crust may initially soften, but will firm up again when cooled.
10. Store the remaining dough in the refrigerator in your lidded (not airtight) container and use it over the next 14 days: You'll find that even one day's storage improves the flavor and texture of your bread. This maturation continues over the 14-day storage period. Refrigerate unused dough in a lidded storage container (again, not airtight). If you mixed your dough in this container, you've avoided some cleanup. Cut off and shape more loaves as you need them. We often have several types of dough storing in the refrigerator at once. The dough can also be frozen in 1-pound portions in an airtight container and defrosted overnight in the refrigerator prior to baking day.