FRENCH BREAD
Makes 2 loaves
By Dennis W. Viau; adapted from traditional recipes

Homemade French bread has a special beauty all its own, and it usually generates “Oooo’s!” and “Ahhh’s!” when brought to the table. I was invited to a potluck lunch and I was on the “Bread” list. So I made this bread. Everyone else brought something they bought at the store. When word got around that I made the French bread, everyone lined up for a piece. Two loaves were gone in very little time. Homemade bread simply has that special appeal and mystique that engenders fascination and admiration. It’s also cheap. I buy my bread flour in 25-pound sacks at the warehouse store. A loaf of bread costs me about 25¢ if I don’t add beer.

Bread making is also easy when you have a stand mixer1 (see notes at end). I made bread by hand for years before I bought a stand mixer. So feel free to use your hands; it’s good exercise.

**Ingredients:**
- 2 pounds (900g) bread flour (6 cups scooped or 7 cups sifted2, see notes at end)
- 1 tablespoon yeast, instant or active dry
- 2½ cups (591ml) water
- 2 teaspoons salt

**Directions:**
Heat the water to about 115°F (45°C), or use warm tap water. In a mixer bowl combine approximately half the flour with the yeast. Mix in the warm liquid with a rubber spatula, scraping the sides and bottom of the bowl, and let rest for about 5 minutes to activate the yeast.

Add the remaining flour and the salt. Combine until thoroughly incorporated and then knead the dough for about 5 to 10 minutes, until smooth and elastic. It should be slightly sticky, so try to avoid any temptation to add more flour.

Place in a large buttered bowl and roll around to coat the entire surface with butter. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to rise in a cool (65°F/15°C) place until tripled in bulk, about two hours.

Deflate the dough a little and shape into a ball. Return to the bowl and cover again. Allow to rise a second time, about 1 hour. This additional rise will enhance the texture and flavor.

Divide into two even portions. Shape into loaves and place on a greased or lined baking sheet or baguette pan. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to rise again about 45 to 60 minutes.

Heat the oven to 425°F (220°C). Slit the top of each loaf diagonally a few times with a sharp knife or razor blade, about ¼ inch (6mm) deep. Place the loaves in the heated oven and spray the loaves and walls of the oven with water, **but don't spray the bulb**; it might explode. Repeat a minute later and again another minute later. Wait 3 minutes and spray the oven and loaves one more time. Bake 20 minutes, turn off the heat, open the door about an inch or two and let the bread remain in the oven 5 minutes. The internal temperature of the bread should be between 195°F and 205°F (90°C and 96°C). Cool on a wire rack before cutting.

The **Step By Step** guide begins on the following page.
Unlike my regular loaf bread, in which I add beer, vital wheat gluten, and a little sugar, traditional French bread is made with only flour, water, yeast, and salt. Pay no attention to those who argue otherwise. The French bread authorities are very particular about their bread.

Dump half the flour and all the other ingredients into a bowl and then combine.
I heat my liquid to about 115°F (46°C) because this is supposedly the best temperature to activate the yeast. You don't need to be this fussy. Warm to the touch is good. It shouldn't be hot, as that would kill the yeast. Yeast is a living thing that likes warm humid environments.

Add the warm liquid and mix well with a rubber spatula, scraping the bowl. Let this mixture sit for about 5 minutes to activate the yeast.
Add the remaining flour and combine. The dough should be a little on the sticky side. Although I am using a stand mixer, you can do this by hand. It’s good exercise.

I like to see the dough sticking to the bottom of the bowl. This is a good indicator the finished bread will have the texture I want. The sticky dough will climb up the dough hook, as you see above, but it will keep falling down again. I occasionally stop the mixer and use my hand to turn the dough a little so that it kneads evenly.
And here is the kneaded dough after 10 minutes of kneading. It is smooth and elastic and barely sticks to the hands.

Clean the mixer bowl, coat it with butter, and place the dough inside. Pat the top with a little butter and push it down to fill the bottom of the bowl. Cover with plastic wrap or a damp towel and allow to rise in a cool place until nearly tripled in bulk, 2 to 3 hours.
This bread dough benefits from rising in a cool place. I put plastic wrap over the top and move it to the floor. I let this dough rise about 2 hours.

Mother nature never fails. If the yeast hasn’t expired, the dough will rise without any intervention from you. Just leave it alone and trust in nature to do her part. Punch down and let rise a second time.
After the second rise, punch the dough down and divide it into two pieces. Flatten each piece into sort of a rectangle, then roll it up into a log, pinching the seams together to seal.

I like to use the side of my hand to press a groove down the center of the dough, then pull the sides up and pinch them together to seal. I do this twice to get a round shape to the loaf.
These shaped loaves are now ready to rise the final time, 45 to 60 minutes. That slight depression down the center of each loaf will disappear as the dough rises. I am using a shaped baguette pan, made to hold two loaves, and I like to line it with parchment paper (which I can toss into the recycling bin afterward). One less pan to clean up when I’m done. You don’t need a special baguette pan. You can place the loaves on a baking sheet. They’ll come out a little flatter, but they’ll look fine and taste just as good.

Before putting the dough into the oven to bake, slit each loaf with a sharp knife. (That loaf in the back looks rather ugly. Stuff happens.) The loaf in the front has the better shape, so this one goes with me to a friend’s house where I have been invited to dinner. Bake in a 425°F (220°C) oven for 20 minutes until a rich golden color (and enjoy the fragrance of baking bread in your kitchen). The internal temperature should come up to between 195°F and 205°F (90°C and 96°C) when the bread is finished baking.
Finally, here are the baked loaves, fresh from the oven. (That ugly loaf—the one in the back—turned out looking pretty good after all.) Cool on a wire rack and try to resist the temptation to cut into them while they are still hot. The inside needs to cool to let the starches set up properly.

Here is another picture of a loaf I made on a different day. I slashed the loaves at a different angle to put 3 slits in the crust rather than 4.

NOTES

1 I prefer using a stand mixer to knead the dough. You can easily knead it by hand, which is better for learning the texture of bread dough. After kneading for ten minutes it should be smooth and elastic and moist enough to almost stick to your hands. When you start kneading it will be way too sticky. Avoid any desire to add more flour. Keep kneading until the gluten develops and the dough takes on an elastic consistency. The dough will stick to your hands less as it becomes more elastic.

2 Weighing flour for baking is the most accurate method. The quantity of flour can vary greatly when using a measuring cup. Two methods yield different results. Scooping (plunging an empty cup into a flour container and leveling off the top of the cup) can result in as much as 5.5 ounces of bread flour. Sifting (putting sifted flour into a cup and leveling off the top) typically weighs about 4.5 ounces. Baking requires accuracy. The best way to measure a cup of sifted flour is to place the empty cup on a large sheet of waxed paper or parchment paper. Sift flour into the cup (it will also sift all around it, thus the need for the paper) until the cup overflows. Level off the top of the cup with a knife without pressing the flour into the
cup. The cup should contain about 4.5 ounces of bread flour. (Use the paper to pour the excess flour back into its container.) The original recipe called for 7 cups of sifted flour. \(7 \times 4.5 = 31.5\), about 32 ounces, or 2 pounds. Six cups scooped: \(6 \times 5.5 = 33\) ounces, again, about 2 pounds.