

## *From the Kitchen at San Damiano Friary in San Francisco*

We eat a lot of bread in our friaries. There is a bakery at Little Portion where they bake big batches of bread on Friday mornings for sale, so they always have a few extra loaves on hand for guests and brothers as well. And in our other friaries toast is often eaten for breakfast, or as a snack lightly spread with butter and jam.

Here in San Francisco we periodically have folks ringing our doorbell and asking for something to eat and maybe a cup of hot cocoa. So we always make sure to have bread in the breadbox and a jar of peanut butter in the cupboard. And while we try and stretch every dollar by purchasing bread that's on sale, I realize that sometimes those loaves aren't always the most healthful. So I try, when I can, to make bread at home. That way it's affordable and I have control over what goes in it, flavoring the bread as inspiration strikes.

One of my go-to bread recipes is focaccia. It's a great accompaniment with lots of different dishes, from pasta to soups and stews. And it doesn't take very long to make. The whole process is about 2 and a half to three hours, and most of that time is waiting for the dough to rise which makes it easy to do this while also putting together something else for dinner, which is our one common meal at this friary.

## **Focaccia Bread**

*Here's what you will need:*

1-3/4 cups warm water

1 package active dry yeast (or 2 1/4 teaspoons if your yeast comes in a jar like ours)

1 tablespoon sugar (either regular white sugar or packed brown sugar)

5 cups all-purpose flour, plus additional for kneading (my current favorite variation is to use 2 cups of whole wheat flour and 2-3/4 cups of white all-purpose flour)

1 tablespoon kosher salt, plus additional salt for sprinkling

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil, divided, plus extra for drizzling

Herbs or other flavorings.

Start by whisking together the water, yeast, and sugar in a bowl. Set that aside for about 8 to 10 minutes until it is frothy and smells yeasty. In the meantime, sift together the flour and salt in a bowl. (If you have a stand mixer, go ahead and sift it all into that bowl.) Then take half a cup of the olive oil and drizzle that into the flour mixture. Rub the oil into the flour with your hands making sure it is evenly distributed throughout. (From my own experience it seems that this process makes the finished product more tender.)

When the yeast mixture smells yeasty, go ahead and dump that into the flour mixture. If you are using a mixer, use the dough hook to combine it all together and then let the machine run for about 5 minutes on medium to knead the dough. Sprinkle on more flour if it seems a little too sticky, but be aware that you want the dough to be slack and moist, so don't add too much flour – just enough so that as the hook is moving around the bowl the dough is not sticking to the bottom.

If you do not have a mixer, go ahead and use your hand to mix it all together in the bowl. When it's all combined, flour a surface and dump the dough onto that. Knead it by hand for about 10 minutes or so, sprinkling on more flour if again it is too sticky and leaves bits on your hand as you are working it. But remember that the dough does need to be slack and moist.

Whether you are using a machine or are kneading the dough by hand, you know it is ready when the dough is smooth as you form it into a ball, is not sticky, and springs back when you press the surface lightly with a finger. (If you are using a machine, after the 5 minutes remove the dough from the bowl and knead it a few times by hand, then form it into a ball and check to see that the dough is smooth, not sticky, and springs back.)

Take the bowl you were using and coat it with a little olive oil. Put the dough back into the bowl, cover it with a little more oil, then cover the bowl with cling film and leave the bowl in a warm place for about an hour or so until the dough has doubled in size. Meanwhile, clean up any mess you have made. (This is always important, but especially when you live in community...)

When the dough has risen, lightly punch it down to release the trapped gas. Then take a jelly roll pan or commercial half sheet tray and spread it with the remaining half cup of olive oil. Transfer the dough to the baking sheet and begin spreading it in the pan. While doing this, flip the dough over once to get it coated with the oil. Keep spreading it with your fingers and make lots of holes in the dough as you press your fingers all the way down to the bottom of the pan. Do not worry as the dough will rise and bake over those holes, but you need the holes to create the traditional dimpled look of focaccia. And be patient as you work the dough completely into the corners of the pan. At first the dough will keep pulling back on itself, but creating the holes will help with this stretching process.

Now is the time to add any flavorings you want. Chopped fresh herbs, chopped olives, sliced garlic, or minced sun-dried tomatoes are my favorites. Whatever you use, be sure to push them into the dough all over the surface. And it is also alright to use nothing at all and just have a plain loaf of focaccia.

Cover the pan with cling film and leave in a warm place for another hour or so until it doubles in size. (After 30 minutes you will want to preheat your oven to 425 degrees Fahrenheit.) You will know it is ready when you lightly press your finger into the side of the dough and it holds the shape – before it is ready the dough will spring back when you do this. Then you want to lightly sprinkle the surface with some salt and drizzle it lightly with some more olive oil.

Bake the focaccia for 15 minutes, then rotate the pan and bake for an additional 10 to 15 more minutes until it is brown all over the top and the bottom is browned but not burned. Allow the loaf to cool in the pan on a rack for about 10 minutes before removing from the pan and allowing it to cool completely directly on the rack. Slice it up and enjoy!

(Quick note: the times given for rising are approximate. Much will depend on the warmth of your kitchen. Give the dough enough time to do what it needs to do and you will be rewarded with a light, airy texture that delivers a rich taste from the olive oil. I am certain this will become a favorite of yours too...)

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