

Salt Rising Bread — *American Made*

ARTISANAL FOOD ENCOMPASSES BREADS, CHEESES, FRUIT PRESERVES, CURED MEATS, BEVERAGES, OILS, AND VINEGARS THAT ARE MADE BY HAND, USING TRADITIONAL METHODS, BY SKILLED CRAFT WORKERS, KNOWN AS FOOD ARTISANS.

— *Wikipedia*



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Products born out of necessity have long been the beginning of amazing discoveries. Salt Rising Bread is believed to have been developed by women in the Appalachian region of early America. Yeast found in sourdough and other breads is the leavening that makes dough rise, but with yeast being difficult for pioneer women to obtain, they had to utilize other resources. They may not have known the science of the process, but they found it was possible to create a batter-like starter culture from bacteria. The starter, consisting of warm water or milk being added to cornmeal or potatoes was the beginning of the process. The cornmeal or potato mixture would start to ferment; but to keep the mixture fermenting and not kill the growing bacteria; the starter had to be kept warm – but not too hot.

This starter is then used to create an overnight ‘sponge,’ which is then used to leaven dough, raising it to its final form. The “rising agent” has been identified as *Clostridium perfringens*, not salt, and is presumably derived from the environment. It turns out bacteria like *Clostridium perfringens* are ubiquitous – they’re found all through nature, on potatoes, in flour, and in cornmeal. According to the **West Virginia Medical Journal**, the baking process reduces the bacteria to safe levels.

The origin of the name Salt-Rising (or Salt-Risen) bread is difficult to understand since the bread contains little or no salt. Speculation leans toward the starter culture of the pioneer women being kept in the salt barrel for safe-keeping, and providing warmth until it raised enough to be baked.

Salt-rising bread is denser, with a closer grain than yeast-leavened bread and it has a distinctive taste and odor. The sharp smell comes from the fermentation of the ingredients. People that are familiar with the bread consider it to be fragrant, because they know the pungent smell means the starter is working and they’re looking forward to the finished product. Others compare it to the smell of old cheese or smelly socks.

The favorite way to eat the bread seems to be toasted with butter. Some like it dipped in sweet coffee or toasted with milk and brown sugar on top. Still others enjoy the salt rising bread as a grilled cheese sandwich.

Pioneer women of early America would probably be astounded to find that one of their everyday skills would qualify them as Artisans in the 21st century.

Classic American Salt-Rising Bread

Please read this recipe start to finish before beginning, in order to plan a timeline.

Starter 1

¼ cup milk
2 tablespoons yellow cornmeal
1 teaspoon granulated sugar

Starter 2

1 cup hot water (120°F to 130°F)
½ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon granulated sugar
1½ cups King Arthur Unbleached All-Purpose Flour

Dough

4 tablespoons soft butter
½ teaspoon salt
2¼ to 2½ cups King Arthur Unbleached All-Purpose Flour

Instructions

To make Starter 1: Heat the milk until it's nearly but not quite boiling; small bubbles will form around the edge of the pan, and you might see a bit of steam.

Cool the milk until it's lukewarm, then whisk together the milk, cornmeal, and sugar in a small heatproof container. The container should be large enough to let the starter expand a bit. Whisking vigorously will help prevent lumps.

Cover the container with plastic wrap, and place it somewhere warm, between 90°F and 100°F. A turned-off electric oven, with the light turned on for about 2 hours ahead of time, holds a temperature of 95°F to 97°F. *Our chef used an instant pot on Yogurt setting for 12 hours.*

Let the starter rest in its warm place overnight, or for 8 to 12 hours. It won't expand much, but will develop a bubbly foam on its surface. It'll also smell a bit fermented. If it doesn't bubble at all, and doesn't smell fermented, your starter has failed; try again, using different cornmeal, or finding a warmer spot.

To make Starter 2: Combine the hot water (120°F - 130°F) with the salt, baking soda, and sugar, stirring to combine. Add the flour, stirring until everything is thoroughly moistened.

Stir Starter 1 into Starter 2.

Cover the bowl with plastic wrap, and place it in the same warm spot Starter 1 was in. Let it rest until very bubbly and doubled in size, 2 to 4 hours. If it's not showing any bubbles after a couple of hours, move it somewhere warmer.

Transfer your bubbly starter to a larger bowl.

Stir in the soft butter, salt, and flour. Knead until smooth; the dough will be soft, and fairly elastic/stretchy.

Shape the dough into a log, and place it in a lightly greased 8½" x 4½" loaf pan.

Cover the pan, and place it back in its warm spot. Let the loaf rise until it's crowned about 1/2" to 3/4" over the rim of the pan, which could take up to 4 hours or so. This won't form the typical large, domed top; it will rise straight up, with just a slight dome.

Towards the end of the rising time, preheat oven to 350°F. Bake the bread for 35 to 40 minutes, until it's nicely browned. Again, it won't rise much; that's okay.

Remove the bread from the oven; if you have a digital thermometer, it should read about 190°F to 200°F at its center. Wait 5 minutes, then turn it out of the pan onto a rack to cool.

Store cooled bread at room temperature for 5 to 7 days; freeze for longer storage.

Note:

If you've never made salt-rising bread, trust the recipe. Yes, it's supposed to smell that way. Yes, it's very important to keep the starter warm. The end result will be a distinctively flavored, fine-grained loaf of bread that will stay fresh for almost a week. The bread's aroma is redolent of cheese, but there's no cheese in this bread; the flavor comes from the slight fermentation of the ingredients during the bread's preparation. Be prepared; the starter and dough will smell like... dirty socks? Old sneakers mixed with Parmesan cheese? Somewhat unpleasant, anyway, but please bear with it — it's just the enzymes and bacteria doing their jobs and giving the bread its special qualities.



◀ Bubbly starter



◀ Making the dough

▲ Shape the dough into a log



▲ Let the dough rise 4 hours or so