

Pain Francais (French Bread)

(From Mastering the Art of French Cooking: Volume Two by Julia Child and Simone Beck)
Daring Bakers Challenge #16: February 2008

Hosts: Breadchick Mary (The Sour Dough) and Sara (I Like To Cook)

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Recipe Quantity:

- 3 - baguettes (24" x 2") or batards (16" x 3") or
- 6 – short loaves, ficelles, 12 – 16" x 2" or
- 3 – round loaves, boules, 7 – 8" in diameter or
- 12 – round or oval rolls, petits pains or
- 1 – large round or oval loaf, pain de menage or miche; pain boulot

Recipe Time: 7 – 9 hours

Challenge Requirements:

1. You must follow the recipe exactly as written. No sponges or poolishes allowed.
2. You may not add anything but flour, salt, yeast, and water to the dough
3. You must make at least one loaf of plain French bread
4. You must make the bread in “free form” fashion. No loaf pans, bannetons, brotforms or baguette pans may be used.

Allowed Modifications:

1. You may use either the directions for making the bread completely by hand or the directions for using a stand mixer with a dough hook. You should not use either a food processor or a bread machine to do the kneading as this dough could damage those machines.
2. You may choose to make any or all of the shapes described in the recipe. All the classic French bread shapes and how to form them are described in detail in Julia’s original recipe.
3. If you make more than one loaf of French bread, you may top the other loaf or loaves with any ingredient or method you wish. You MAY NOT add any ingredient to the dough itself though. Remember: One (1) loaf **must be** absolutely plain, no topping.
3. High altitude modifications are allowed as long as you stay "true" to the recipe.
4. Conversion for certain dietary restrictions like gluten-free, dairy-free, vegan etc. is allowed.

Since this recipe is already dairy free and vegan, you will not have to make any changes and should follow the recipe as written.

Note about Gluten Free recipe change for French bread: One of the things that distinguish French bread is the structure of the gluten that supports the bread during the rise and baking, the crumb and the

crispness of the crust. These things will be very difficult to achieve with a gluten free loaf. We are looking forward to seeing and hearing about how you do with this month's challenge!!

5. Recipe ingredient exception allowed only if allergy or an ingredient not available or cost prohibitive in your region.

Additional Information about Challenge Recipe

Flour: French bakers make plain French bread out of unbleached flour that has gluten strength of 8 to 9 per cent. Most American all-purpose flour is bleached and has slightly higher gluten content as well as being slightly finer in texture. It is easier to make bread with French flour than with American flour.

(Mary and Sara Note: This was true when this book was written in the late 50s but today it is very easy to find unbleached AP flour. In addition, you can source French style, lower gluten AP flour from several specialty millers such as King Arthur Flour)

Bakers' Oven Versus Home Ovens: Bakers' ovens are so constructed that one slides the formed bread dough from a wooden panel right onto the hot, fire-brick oven floor, a steam injection system humidifies the oven for the first few minutes of baking. Steam allows the yeast to work a little longer in the dough and this, combined with the hot baking surface, produced an extra push of volume. In addition, steam coagulating the starch on the surface of the dough gives the crust its characteristic brown color. Although you can produce a good loaf of French bread without steam or a hot baking surface, you will a larger and handsomer loaf when you simulate professional conditions.

(Mary and Sara Note: Julia provided a very nice step by step of how to make a simulated bakers oven at home at the end of the recipe. We will provide those same steps plus a few of Mary's bread making/baking tips she uses for those of you Daring Bakers who want to take it to the limits!)

Stand Mixer Mixing and Kneading of French Bread Dough: French bread dough is too soft to work in the electric food processor, but the heavy-duty mixer with dough hook works perfectly. The double-hook attachment that comes with some hand held mixers and the hand-cranking bread pails are slower and less efficient, to our mind, than hand kneading. In any case, when you are using electricity, follow the steps in the recipe as outlined, including the rests; do not over-knead and for the heavy duty mixer, do not go over a moderate speed of number 3 or 4, or you risk breaking down the gluten in the dough.

(Mary and Sara Note: When this book was written the average home heavy duty stand mixer was less than 300W and the hand mixer was less than 250W. Today you can find stand mixers with much better wattage and torque. Mary has made this dough using both her old Sunbeam Mixmaster from the late 80s with a 325W motor and her Kitchen Aid 7 speed Ultra Power Plus Handheld and had both struggle quite a lot. She has also made this dough with a Kitchen Aid Artisan (350W) and it did OK but also struggled a bit at the end so if you have an Artisan, keep your eye on it, especially at the end of the kneading as the gluten really develops. Mary has made this recipe several times with her Kitchen Aid Pro V Plus (450W) and it had no problems what so ever with the dough. So, a good rule of thumb to use to decide between making the dough by hand or by machine is probably 350W or better for motor power in your mixer, either hand or stand. If it looks like your mixer is struggling, finish the dough by hand. One last reminder, always follow the speed directions of your mixer manufacturer for using the dough hook. The Kitchen Aid recommendation is not to go over Speed 2 when using the dough hook on

their mixers.)

Equipment Needed: Unless you plan to go into the more elaborate simulation of a baker's oven, you need no unusual equipment for the following recipe. Here are the requirements, some of which may sound odd but will explain themselves when you read the recipe.

4 to 5 quart mixing bowl with fairly vertical rather than outward slanting sides
a kneading surface of some sort, 1 1/2 to 2 square feet
a rubber spatula or either a metal scraper or a stiff wide metal spatula
1 to 2 unwrinkled canvas pastry cloths or stiff linen towels upon which the dough may rise
a stiff piece of cardboard or plywood 18 – 20 inches long and 6 – 8 inches wide, for unmolding dough from canvas to baking sheet
finely ground cornmeal or pasta pulverized in an electric blender to sprinkle on unmolding board so as to prevent dough from sticking
the largest baking sheet that will fit in your oven
a razor blade or extremely sharp knife for slashing the top of the dough
a soft pastry brush or fine spray atomizer for moistening dough before and during baking
a room thermometer to verify rising temperature
Mary and Sara also recommend the use of an oven thermometer

Making French Bread:

Step 1: The Dough Mixture – le fraissage (or frasage)

(Mary and Sara Note: The metric measurements were converted from an online conversion chart and then checked for us by [Baking Soda](#), who gets a Golden Loaf Award for standing in her kitchen in her pjs and while she drank her first cup of coffee scooping flour onto scales.)

1 cake (0.6 ounce) (20grams) fresh yeast or 1 package dry active yeast
1/3 cup (75ml) warm water, not over 100 degrees F/38C in a glass measure
3 1/2 cup (about 1 lb) (490 gr) all purpose flour, measured by scooping
dry measure cups into flour and sweeping off excess
2 1/4 tsp (12 gr) salt
1 1/4 cups (280 - 300ml) tepid water @ 70 – 74 degrees/21 - 23C

(Mary and Sara Note: if you are using instant yeast, you may reduce the amount to 1 3/4 tsp or 7 gr but you will still want to "proof" it because that is important for taste development in this bread)

Both Methods: Stir the yeast in the 1/3 cup warm water and let liquefy completely while measuring flour into mixing bowl. When yeast has liquefied, pour it into the flour along with the salt and the rest of the water.

Hand Method: Stir and cut the liquids into the flour with a rubber spatula, pressing firmly to form a dough and making sure that all the bits of flour and unmassed pieces are gathered in. Turn dough out onto kneading surface, scraping bowl clean. Dough will be soft and sticky.

Stand Mixer: *(Mary and Sara note: Julia did not give detailed instructions about how the dough comes together other than "combine the ingredients using the dough hook", therefore these directions are*

based upon their experiences) Using the dough hook attachment on the speed the mixer manufacturer recommends for dough hook use or the lowest setting if there is no recommendation, slowly work all the ingredients together until a dough ball is formed, stopping the mixer and scrapping the bits of flour and chunks of dough off the bottom of the bowl and pressing them into the dough ball. Continue to mix the dough on a low speed until all the bits of flour and loose chunks of dough have formed a solid dough ball.

(Mary and Sara Note for both methods: Depending the humidity and temperature of your kitchen and the type of AP flour your use, you may need to add additional flour or water to the dough. To decide if this is necessary, we recommend stopping during the mixing process and push at your dough ball. If the dough is super sticky, add additional flour one handful at a time until the dough is slightly sticky and tacky but not dry. If the dough is dry and feels hard, add 1 Tbsp of water a time until the dough is soft and slightly sticky. Mary likes to keep a soup or cereal bowl of flour and a 1 cup measure of water with a tablespoon next to her mixer for this.)

Both Methods: Turn dough out onto kneading surface, scraping bowl clean. Dough will be soft and sticky. Let the dough rest for 2 – 3 minutes while you wash and dry the bowl (and the dough hook if using a stand mixer).

Step 2: Kneading – petrissage

The flour will have absorbed the liquid during this short rest, and the dough will have a little more cohesion for the kneading that is about to begin. Use one hand only for kneading and keep the other clean to hold a pastry scrapper, to dip out extra flour, to answer the telephone, and so forth. Your object in kneading is to render the dough perfectly smooth and to work it sufficiently so that all the gluten molecules are moistened and joined together into an interlocking web. You cannot see this happen, of course, but you can feel it because the dough will become elastic and will retract into shape when you push it out.

Hand Method: Start kneading by lifting the near edge of the dough, using a pastry scraper or stiff wide spatula to help you if necessary, and flipping the dough over onto itself. Scrape dough off the surface and slap it down; lift edge and flip it over again, repeating the movement rapidly.

In 2 -3 minutes the dough should have enough body so that you can give it a quick forward push with the heel of your hand as you flip it over. Continue to knead rapidly and vigorously in this way. If the dough remains too sticky, knead in a sprinkling of flour. The whole kneading process will take 5 – 10 minutes, depending on how expert you become.

Shortly after this point, the dough should have developed enough elasticity so it draws back into shape when pushed, indicating the gluten molecules have united and are under tension like a thin web of rubber; the dough should also begin to clean itself off the kneading surface, although it will stick to your fingers if you hold a pinch of dough for more than a second or two.

Stand Mixer: *(Mary and Sara note: Julia did not give detailed instructions about kneading the dough other than “knead”)* Place dough back into the bowl and using the dough hook attachment at the recommended speed (low), knead the dough for about 5 – 7 minutes. At about the 5 minute mark, stop the mixer and push at the dough with your fingertips. If it springs back quickly, you have kneaded the dough enough. If it doesn't spring back continue to knead, stopping the mixer and retesting every 2

minutes. If the dough sticks to your fingers, toss a sprinkling of flour onto the dough and continue to knead. The dough should be light and springy when it is ready. Mary also recommends always finishing with about 1 – 2 minutes of hand kneading just to get a good feel for how the gluten is formed.

Both Methods: Let dough rest for 3 – 4 minutes. Knead by hand for a minute. The surface should now look smooth; the dough will be less sticky but will still remain soft. It is now ready for its first rise.

(Mary and Sara note: From here out in the recipe, there is no difference for the hand vs. stand method)

Step 3: First Rising – pointage premier temps (3-5 hours at around 70 degrees)

You now have approximately 3 cups of dough that is to rise to 3 1/2 times its original volume, or to about 10 1/2 cups. Wash and fill the mixing bowl with 10 1/2 cups of tepid water (70 – 80 degrees) and make a mark to indicate that level on the outside of the bowl. Note, that the bowl should have fairly upright sides; if they are too outward slanting, the dough will have difficulty in rising. Pour out the water, dry the bowl, and place the dough in it *(Mary and Sara Note: Very lightly grease the bowl with butter or kitchen spray as well to prevent the risen dough from sticking to the bowl).*

Slip the bowl into a large plastic bag or cover with plastic, and top with a folded bath towel. Set on a wooden surface, marble or stone are too cold. Or on a folded towel or pillow, and let rise free from drafts anyplace where the temperature is around 70 degrees. If the room is too hot, set bowl in water and keep renewing water to maintain around 70 degrees. Dough should take at least 3 – 4 hours to rise to 10 1/2 cups. If temperature is lower than 70 degrees, it will simply take longer.

(Mary and Sara Note: If your oven has an oven light, turn on the oven light when you start making the dough. By the time you are ready for the first rise, the temperature in your oven will be around 70 degrees. You can check with your oven thermometer. If you don't have an oven light, like Mary, you can turn the oven on to its lowest setting about 5 minutes before you begin your rise. Leave on for 1 – 5 minutes until the temperature is around 75- 80 degrees. Turn off oven, when you open the door to put the dough in to rise, your oven will be around 70 degrees. Another trick is to put your dough on top of your hot water heater. Place a folded towel on top of the hot water heater and let rise. Also a heating pad works well. Mary also has used those give away shower caps from hotels to cover her bowls and the bowl covers for the metal mixing bowls work well too. Always lightly grease the plastic wrap or bowl cover so if the risen dough touches it, the dough won't stick.)

When fully risen, the dough will be humped into a slight dome, showing that the yeast is still active; it will be light and spongy when pressed. There will usually be some big bubbly blisters on the surface, and if you are using a glass bowl you will see bubbles through the glass.

Step 4: Deflating and Second Rising – rupture; pointage deuxieme temps (1 1/2 to 2 hours at around 70 degrees)

The dough is now ready to be deflated, which will release the yeast engendered gases and redistribute the yeast cells so that the dough will rise again and continue the fermentation process.

With a rubber spatula, dislodge dough from inside of bowl and turn out onto a lightly floured surface, scraping bowl clean. If dough seems damp and sweaty, sprinkle with a tablespoon of flour.

Lightly flour the palms of your hands and flatten the dough firmly but not too roughly into a circle,

deflating any gas bubbles by pinching them.

Lift a corner of the near side and flip it down on the far side. Do the same with the left side, then the right side. Finally, lift the near side and tuck it just under the edge of the far side. The mass of dough will look like a rounded cushion.

Slip the sides of your hands under the dough and return it to the bowl. Cover and let rise again, this time to not quite triple, but again until it is dome shaped and light and spongy when touched.

(Mary and Sara Note: You may need to lightly re-grease your bowl and plastic wrap for the second rise to prevent sticking)

Step 5: Cutting and resting dough before forming loaves

Loosen dough all around inside of bowl and turn out onto a lightly floured surface. Because of its two long rises, the dough will have much more body. If it seems damp and sweaty, sprinkle lightly with flour.

Making clean, sure cuts with a large knife or a bench scraper, divide the dough into:

3 equal pieces for long loaves (baguettes or batards) or small round loaves (boules only)

5 – 6 equal pieces for long thin loaves (ficelles)

10 – 12 equal pieces for small oval rolls (petits pains, tire-bouchons) or small round rolls (petits pains, champignons)

2 equal pieces for medium round loaves (pain de menage or miche only)

If you making one large round loaf (pain de menage, miche, or pain boulot), you will not cut the dough at all and just need to follow the directions below.

After you have cut each piece, lift one end and flip it over onto the opposite end to fold the dough into two; place dough at far side of kneading surface. Cover loosely with a sheet of plastic and let rest for 5 minutes before forming. This relaxes the gluten enough for shaping but not long enough for dough to begin rising again.

While the dough is resting, prepare the rising surface; smooth the canvas or linen towelling on a large tray or baking sheet, and rub flour thoroughly into the entire surface of the cloth to prevent the dough from sticking

Step 6: Forming the loaves – la tourne; la mise en forme des patons

Because French bread stands free in the oven and is not baked in a pan, it has to be formed in such a way that the tension of the coagulated gluten cloak on the surface will hold the dough in shape.

For Long Loaves - The Batard: (Baguettes are typically much too long for home ovens but the shaping method is the same)

After the 3 pieces of dough have rested 5 minutes, form one piece at a time, keeping the remaining ones covered.

Working rapidly, turn the dough upside down on a lightly floured kneading surface and pat it firmly but not too roughly into an 8 to 10 inch oval with the lightly floured palms of your hands. Deflate any gas

bubbles in the dough by pinching them.

Fold the dough in half lengthwise by bringing the far edge down over the near edge.

Being sure that the working surface is always lightly floured so the dough will not stick and tear, which would break the lightly coagulated gluten cloak that is being formed, seal the edges of the dough together, your hands extended, thumbs out at right angles and touching.

Roll the dough a quarter turn forward so the seal is on top.

Flatten the dough again into an oval with the palms of your hands.

Press a trench along the central length of the oval with the side of one hand.

Fold in half again lengthwise.

This time seal the edges together with the heel of one hand, and roll the dough a quarter of a turn toward you so the seal is on the bottom.

Now, by rolling the dough back and forth with the palms of your hands, you will lengthen it into a sausage shape. Start in the middle, placing your right palm on the dough, and your left palm on top of your right hand.

Roll the dough forward and backward rapidly, gradually sliding your hands towards the two ends as the dough lengthens.

Deflate any gas blisters on the surface by pinching them. Repeat the rolling movement rapidly several times until the dough is 16 inches long, or whatever length will fit on your baking sheet. During the extension rolls, keep circumference of dough as even as possible and try to start each roll with the sealed side of the dough down, twisting the rope of dough to straighten the line of seal as necessary. If seal disappears, as it sometimes does with all purpose flour, do not worry.

Place the shaped piece of dough, sealed side up, at one end of the flour rubbed canvas, leaving a free end of canvas 3 to 4 inches wide. The top will crust slightly as the dough rises; it is turned over for baking so the soft, smooth underside will be uppermost.

Pinch a ridge 2 1/2 to 3 inches high in the canvas to make a trough, and a place for the next piece. Cover dough with plastic while you are forming the rest of the loaves.

After all the pieces of dough are in place, brace the two sides of the canvas with long rolling pins, baking sheets or books, if the dough seems very soft and wants to spread out. Cover the dough loosely with flour rubbed dish towel or canvas, and a sheet of plastic. Proceed immediately to the final rising, next step.

(Mary and Sara Note: Empty paper towel tubes and/or bottles of spices work well as braces as well)

For Long Thin Loaves – Ficelles: Follow the steps above but making thinner sausage shapes about 1/2

inch in diameter. When they have risen, slash as with the Batard.

For Oval Rolls – Petits Pains, Tire-Bouchons: Form like batards, but you will probably not have to lengthen them at all after the two foldings and sealings. Place rolls on a floured canvas about 2 – 4” apart and cover with plastic to rise. When they have risen, make either 2 parallel slashes or a single slash going from one end to the other.

For Small, Medium, or Large Round Loaves – Pain de Menage, Miches, Boules: The object here is to force the cloak of coagulated gluten to hold the ball of dough in shape: the first movement will make cushion; the second will seal and round the ball, establishing surface tension.

Place the dough on a lightly floured surface.

Lift the left side of the dough with the side of your left hand and bring it down almost to the right side.

Scoop up the right side and push it back almost to the left side. Turn the dough a quarter turn clockwise and repeat the movement 8 – 10 times. The movement gradually smooths the bottom of the dough and establishes the necessary surface tension; think of the surface of the dough as if it were a fine sheet of rubber you were stretching in every direction.

Turn the dough smooth side up and begin rotating it between the palms of your hands, tucking a bit of the dough under the ball as you rotate it. In a dozen turns you should have a neatly shaped ball with a little pucker of dough, le cle, underneath where all the edges have joined together.

Place the dough pucker side up in a flour-rubbed canvas; seal the pucker by pinching with your fingers. Flour lightly, cover loosely and let rise to almost triple its size. After unmolding upside down on the baking sheet, slash with either a long central slash, two long central slashes that cross at right angles, or a semi-circular slash around half the circumference.

For Small Round Rolls – Petits Pains, Champignons: The principles are the same here as for the preceding round loaves, but make the cushion shape with your fingers rather than the palms of your hands.

For the second stage, during which the ball of dough is rotated smooth side up, roll it under the palm of one hand, using your thumb and little finger to push the edges of the dough underneath and to form the pucker, where the edges join together.

Place the formed ball of dough pucker side up on the flour rubbed canvas and cover loosely while forming the rest. Space the balls 2 inches apart. When risen to almost triple its size, lift gently with lightly floured fingers and place pucker side down on baking sheet. Rolls are usually too small for a cross so make either one central slash or the semi-circular cut.

For Large Oval Loaf – Pain Boulot: Follow the directions for the round loaves except instead of rotating between the palms of your hands and tucking to form a round loaf, continue to turn the dough from the right to the left, tucking a bit of each end under the oblong loaf. In a dozen turns you should have a neatly shaped oval with two little puckers of dough, le cles, underneath where all the edges of have joined together.

Place the dough pucker sides up in a flour-rubbed canvas; seal the puckers by pinching with your fingers. Flour lightly, cover loosely and let rise to almost triple its size. After unmolding upside down on the baking sheet, slash with parallel slashes going diagonally across the top starting from the upper left and going to the lower right.

Step 7: Final Rise – l'appret - 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours at around 70 degrees

The covered dough is now to rise until almost triple in volume; look carefully at its pre-risen size so that you will be able to judge correctly. It will be light and swollen when risen, but will still feel a little springy when pressed.

It is important that the final rise take place where it is dry; if your kitchen is damp, hot, and steamy, let the bread rise in another room or dough will stick to the canvas and you will have difficulty getting it off and onto another baking sheet. It will turn into bread in the oven whatever happens, but you will have an easier time and a better loaf if you aim for ideal conditions.

Preheat oven to 450 degrees about 30 minutes before estimated baking time.

Step 8: Unmolding risen dough onto baking sheet – le demoulage.

(Mary and Sara note: we are only going to describe the unmolding of The Batard but the unmolding process is the same no matter the shape of your loaf or loaves. The key to unmolding without deflating your bread is slow and gentle!)

The 3 pieces of risen dough are now to be unmolded from the canvas and arranged upside down on the baking sheet. The reason for this reversal is that the present top of the dough has crusted over during its rise; the smooth, soft underside should be uppermost in the oven so that the dough can expand and allow the loaf its final puff of volume. For the unmolding you will need a non-sticking intermediate surface such as a stiff piece of cardboard or plywood sprinkled with cornmeal or pulverized pasta.

Remove rolling pins or braces. Place the long side of the board at one side of the dough; pull the edge of the canvas to flatten it; then raise and flip the dough softly upside down onto the board.

Dough is now lying along one edge of the unmolding board: rest this edge on the right side of a lightly buttered baking sheet. Gently dislodge dough onto baking sheet, keeping same side of the dough uppermost: this is the soft smooth side, which was underneath while dough rose on canvas. If necessary run sides of hands lightly down the length of the dough to straighten it. Unmold the next piece of dough the same way, placing it to the left of the first, leaving a 3 inch space. Unmold the final piece near the left side of the sheet.

Step 9: Slashing top of the dough – la coupe.

(Mary and Sara Note: We will only describe the slashing for the Batard here. All other slashes for the other shapes are described in Step 6: Forming the Loaves)

The top of each piece of dough is now to be slashed in several places. This opens the covering cloak of gluten and allows a bulge of dough underneath to swell up through the cuts during the first 10 minutes of baking, making decorative patterns in the crust. These are done with a blade that cuts almost

horizontally into the dough to a depth of less than half an inch. Start the cut at the middle of the blade, drawing toward you in a swift clean sweep. This is not quite as easy as it sounds, and you will probably make ragged cuts at first; never mind, you will improve with practice. Use an ordinary razor blade and slide one side of it into a cork for safety; or buy a barbers straight razor at a cutlery store.

For a 16 to 18 inch loaf make 3 slashes. Note that those at the two ends go straight down the loaf but are slightly off centre, while the middle slash is at a slight angle between the two. Make the first cut at the far end, then the middle cut, and finally the third. Remember that the blade should lie almost parallel to the surface of the dough.

Step 10: Baking – about 25 minutes; oven preheated to 450 degrees (230 degrees C).

As soon as the dough has been slashed, moisten the surface either by painting with a soft brush dipped in cold water, or with a fine spray atomizer, and slide the baking sheet onto rack in upper third of preheated oven. Rapidly paint or spray dough with cold water after 3 minutes, again in 3 minutes, and a final time 3 minutes later. Moistening the dough at this point helps the crust to brown and allows the yeast action to continue in the dough a little longer. The bread should be done in about 25 minutes; the crust will be crisp, and the bread will make a hollow sound when thumped.

If you want the crust to shine, paint lightly with a brush dipped in cold water as soon as you slide the baking sheet out of oven.

Step 11: Cooling – 2 to 3 hours.

(Mary and Sara Note: We know this will be the hardest thing to do for this challenge. But, if you do not let the French bread cool, the bread will be doughy and the crust will be soft. If you want to have warm French bread, re-heat the bread after it has cooled in a 400 degree oven, uncovered and directly on the oven rack for 10 – 12 minutes if it is unfrozen. If it has been frozen see the directions below)

Cool the bread on a rack or set it upright in a basket or large bowl so that air can circulate freely around each piece. Although bread is always exciting to eat fresh from the oven, it will have a much better taste when the inside is thoroughly cool and has composed itself.

Step 12: Storing French bread

Because it contains no fats or preservatives of any kind, French bread is at its best when eaten the day it is baked. It will keep for a day or two longer, wrapped airtight and refrigerated, but it will keep best if you freeze it – let the loaves cool first, then wrap airtight. To thaw, unwrap and place on a baking sheet in a cold oven; heat the oven to 400 degrees. In about 20 minutes the crust will be hot and crisp, and the bread thawed. The French, of course, never heat French bread except possibly on Monday, the baker's holiday, when the bread is a day old.

Step 13: Canvas housekeeping

After each bread session, if you have used canvas, brush it thoroughly to remove all traces of flour and hang it out to dry before putting away. Otherwise the canvas could become mouldy and ruin your next batch of dough.

The Simulated Bakers' Oven

Baking in the ordinary way, as described in the preceding recipe, produces an acceptable loaf of bread

but does not nearly approach the glory you can achieve when you turn your home oven into a baker's oven. Merely providing yourself with the proper amount of steam, if you can do nothing else, will vastly improve the crust, the color, the slash patterns, and the volume of your bread; steam is only a matter of plopping a heated brick or stone into a pan of water in the bottom of the oven. The second provision is a hot surface upon which the naked dough can bake; this gives that added push of volume that improves both the appearance and the slash patterns. When you have the hot baking surface, you will then also need a paddle or board upon which you can transfer dough from canvas to hot baking surface. For the complete set up here is you should have, and any building-supply store stocks these items.

For the hot baking surface: Metal will not do as a hot baking surface because it burns the bottom of the dough. The most practical and easily obtainable substance is ordinary red floor tiles 1/4" thick. They come in various sizes such as 6 x 6, 6 x 3, and you only need enough to line the surface of an oven rack. Look them up under Tiles in your Directory, and ask for "quarry tiles" their official name.

(Mary and Sara Note: When this book was written, quarry tiles had a fair amount of asbestos in them. Today, in North America and Europe, they normally are made of clay. Make sure if you decide to go purchase some quarry tiles you only purchase unglazed quarry tiles because most of the glazes used contain lead or some other nasty substance that could get transferred. A large pizza stone will also work but make sure it is at least 1/4 inch thick because the thinner ones can break when used at the high heats that baking bread requires. Make sure you never put wet tiles in the oven because they can shatter or worse as the oven heats up.)

For unmolding the risen dough from its canvas: A piece of 3/16 inch plywood about 20 inches wide.

For sliding the dough onto the hot tiles: When you are doing 3 long loaves, you must slide them together onto the hot tiles; to do so you unmold them one at a time with one board and arrange them side by side on the second board, which takes place on the baker's paddle, la pelle. Buy a piece of plywood slightly longer but 2 inches narrower than your oven rack.

(Mary and Sara note: Today, you can buy a real baker's paddle easily online or at a restaurant supply store for about the same money as a piece of plywood and it will have a bevelled edge that will make sliding loaves in and out of the oven easier)

To prevent dough from sticking to unmolding and sliding boards: White cornmeal or small dried pasta pulverized in the electric blender until it is the consistency of table salt. This is called fleurage.

The steam contraption: Something that you can heat to sizzling hot on top of the stove and then slide into a pan of water in the oven to make a great burst of steam: a brick, a solid 10lb rock, piece of cast iron or other metal. A 9 x 12 inch roasting pan 2 inches deep to hold an inch of water and the hot brick. *(Mary and Sara note: Other ways to get steam in the oven is pre-heat the oven and then to fill a pan with ice cubes put it on the lower rack and then pour warm water into the pan. The temperature difference between the ice cubes and the warm water will create steam. Also you can toss ice cubes on the bottom of the oven. Put a metal baking sheet on the bottom rack, pre-heat the oven with the baking sheet in the oven and right before you put your loaves in, spritz water onto the pan.*