Indian Flatbread (Naan)

We set out to reproduce the charred exterior and tender interior of *naan* baked in a tandoor—but without the 1,000-degree heat.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

I've re-created plenty of Indian curries, biryanis, and chutneys in my home kitchen, but *naan*, the cuisine's famous leavened flatbread, is something I had yet to tackle. That might be because it's considered "restaurant" bread, even in India. To create the ideal version featuring a light, airy interior and a pliant, chewy crust, the dough is baked in the traditional barrel-shaped, charcoal- or wood-fired clay oven known as a tandoor. These vessels weigh upwards of 600 pounds and often top 1,000 degrees, which explains how the crust gets so beautifully blistered—and also why few home cooks own tandoors. At the same time, I've often wondered if I really have to venture out for something as simple as flatbread. I decided it was time to give home-baked naan a shot.

I scoured the test kitchen's collection of Indian cookbooks and came away feeling optimistic. The ingredient list would be no problem. Most of the recipes I found called for some combination of flour, yeast, water, salt, yogurt, and sugar. And though I'd worried that getting good char on the bread without a tandoor would be tricky, most sources seemed to suggest that it could be done in a conventional oven on a preheated baking stone.

A hot cast-iron skillet is the best way to produce lightly charred and blistered, restaurant-quality naan at home.

Rolling in the Dough

Aiming for a dough that was wet enough to stay moist during cooking but not so hydrated that it was too sticky or soupy to handle, I mixed together a few cups of all-purpose flour with a pinch of yeast, about ⅓ cup of low-fat yogurt, a little sugar, and some salt, along with enough water to make it pliable. I let the dough rise for a few hours, divided it into four balls, rolled them into thin disks, and slid them onto a baking stone that I'd preheated as hot as my oven would go (500 degrees).

Trouble started early, when I was rolling out the dough rounds and they snapped back like rubber bands. When I finally managed to get them flat, the loaves baked up dry and tough before they'd even had a chance to properly brown on the bottom, let alone develop any of those dark patchy blisters that, in my opinion, are the best part of naan. They also continued to rapidly lose more moisture as they cooled—a problem since, unlike in a restaurant, I couldn't exactly make each piece to order. Leaving the question on hold as to whether the oven was the best stand-in for a tandoor, I decided the first order of business was to create a dough that was softer but still pleasantly chewy.

One change to make right off the bat: switching from low-fat yogurt to the whole-milk kind. The extra fat would coat the flour proteins, weakening gluten formation by preventing them from binding to each other too tightly, as well as hold in more moisture for a more tender bread. With this change, my next batch of dough was easier to roll out, but it baked up too soft; the inside was like sandwich bread. I wondered if the higher protein (as much as 14 percent) in bread flour might be a better bet. But bread flour created so much chew that the resulting bread was leathery. High-protein all-purpose flour, such as King Arthur brand, was a better choice, producing naan that boasted a near-ideal texture. As I pulled apart an oven-fresh piece, I couldn't help but admire its tender chew. But then the inevitable happened: The thin rounds cooled almost instantly and were tough by the time I pulled the next batch off the baking stone a few minutes later. To buy each piece some time, I needed to figure out a way to keep the dough from drying out.

The solution wasn't more water; that would just make the dough loose and sticky. More fat was a better idea, since besides impeding gluten formation it limits water evaporation from the starches during baking, minimizing moisture loss. To that end, I tried adding vegetable oil to the dough, 1 teaspoon at a time, discovering that the more I added the more tender and capable of staying soft the breads became. The dough maxed out at 5 teaspoons per cup of flour; any more and the bread was greasy. But I had one more fat source in mind to boost moisture retention: an egg yolk. While unusual in naan recipes, egg yolks often turn up in other types of bread for just this reason. (I stayed away from whole eggs, knowing that the white's structure-enhancing proteins would toughen the dough.)

The last tweak I made before moving on to the cooking method was refrigerating the dough for several hours to keep it from snapping back during stretching. It was a holdover from my Thin-Crust Pizza recipe (January/February 2011), from which I learned that cold fermentation encourages the relaxation of gluten strands so that the dough is more flexible. An added bonus: Preparing the dough the day before freed up time the next day for cooking the rest of the meal.

With the dough formula nailed down, I moved on to face the real challenge of making naan at home: getting good color and char without a tandoor.

Naan Sense

Since the oven wasn't browning the bread fast enough, I figured my best alternative was the hottest, most powerful heat source I had: a grill. I fired up

Look: No Tandoor Needed

Video available FREE for 4 months at www.CooksIllustrated.com/jun12

some charcoal, expecting to come away with beautifully grill-marked breads. To say my first attempt was a disaster would be an understatement. Like a poorly cooked piece of meat, the bottom blackened while the top remained practically raw. I thought the fire was just too hot so I downsized it on my next test, but even a smaller fire produced the same charred result. Flipping the dough midway through cooking also wasn't the answer—it merely dried out the bread.

I took a step back to consider what really happens when naan cooks in a tandoor. The shaped dough is slapped directly onto the tandoor's inside wall, where it sticks and cooks in minutes, without ever being flipped. While heat radiating from the coals at the bottom of the oven helps cook the bread's exposed side, more important is the heat conducted through its walls, which also trap moisture to keep the bread soft. I could see now that a grill wasn't the best substitute for a tandoor. But neither was a pizza stone in the oven, since that method also exposed the bread to drying air currents. My choice became clear: a skillet on the stovetop.

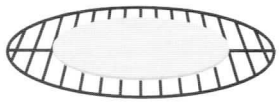
So for my next test, I slipped my stretched and shaped dough onto a preheated cast-iron skillet. It puffed up quickly, and after a few minutes the bottom had browned a bit; I flipped it to finish cooking the top side. The result was a dramatic improvement on anything I'd made so far—lightly browned and bubbled in spots and tender inside. It wasn't perfect, though. The bread ballooned as it baked, which made it cook unevenly when I flipped it; the crust was a bit floury; and the loaves still dried out too quickly as they sat.

None of these issues were hard to fix. I poked the dough with a fork before putting it in the pan to let steam escape and prevent puffing. Improving the crust and prolonging the optimal tender texture of the bread required a two-tiered approach. First, I misted the dough with water before cooking it to moisten the flour that coated it. I also covered the pan to trap steam around the bread as it baked.

My simple approach created naan as good as any from a restaurant. Brushed with a little melted butter after cooking, it makes for a delicious edible utensil, perfect for tearing into bite-size pieces to dip into curries, chutneys, or even stew.

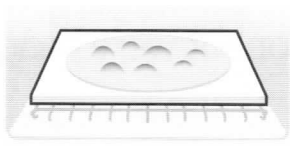
Finding the Right Heat to Replicate a Tandoor

We initially thought that a grill or preheated pizza stone would best approximate the intense heat of a tandoor, which cooks naan mainly by heat conducted through its walls. We were wrong. The best alternative? A trusty cast-iron skillet



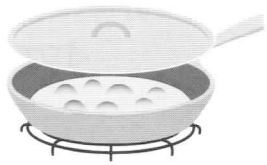
GRILL? NO

A grill's searing heat gets close to that of a tandoor. The problem: It only chars the bottom of the bread, while the top remains barely cooked. (Flipping only dries out the bread.)



PIZZA STONE IN OVEN? NO

Baked on a pizza stone in the oven, the bread encounters the conductive heat of the stone, which we wanted, and the drying heat of the oven's air currents, which we didn't.



COVERED SKILLET? YES

A covered skillet delivers heat to the bottom and top of the bread, producing loaves that are nicely charred but still moist. To ensure a tender interior, we mist the dough with water.

INDIAN FLATBREAD (NAAN)

MAKES 4 PIECES

This recipe worked best with a high-protein all-purpose flour such as King Arthur brand. Do not use nonfat yogurt in this recipe. A 12-inch nonstick skillet may be used in place of the cast-iron skillet. For efficiency, stretch the next ball of dough while each naan is cooking.

- ½ cup ice water
- ⅓ cup plain whole-milk yogurt
- 3 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 large egg yolk
- 2 cups (10 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1¼ teaspoons sugar
- ½ teaspoon instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 1¼ teaspoons salt
- 1½ tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

1. In measuring cup or small bowl, combine water, yogurt, 3 tablespoons oil, and egg yolk. Process flour, sugar, and yeast in food processor until combined, about 2 seconds. With processor running, slowly add water mixture; process until dough is just combined and no dry flour remains, about 10 seconds. Let dough stand for 10 minutes.

2. Add salt to dough and process until dough forms satiny, sticky ball that clears sides of workbowl, 30 to 60 seconds. Transfer dough to lightly floured work surface and knead until smooth, about 1 minute. Shape dough into tight ball and place in large, lightly oiled bowl. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 16 to 24 hours.

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 200 degrees. Place heatproof plate on rack. Transfer dough to lightly floured work surface and divide into 4 equal pieces. Shape each piece into smooth, tight ball. Place dough balls on lightly oiled baking sheet, at least 2 inches apart; cover loosely with plastic coated with vegetable oil spray. Let stand for 15 to 20 minutes.

4. Transfer 1 ball to lightly floured work surface and sprinkle with flour. Using hands and rolling pin, press and roll piece of dough into 9-inch round of even thickness, sprinkling dough and work surface with flour as needed to prevent sticking. Using fork, poke entire surface of round 20 to 25 times. Heat remaining 1 teaspoon oil in 12-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Wipe oil out of skillet completely with paper towels. Mist top of dough lightly with water. Place dough in pan, moistened side down; mist top surface of dough with water; and cover. Cook until bottom is browned in spots across surface, 2 to 4 minutes. Flip naan, cover, and continue to cook on second side until lightly browned, 2 to 3 minutes. (If naan puffs up, gently poke with fork to deflate.) Flip naan, brush top with about 1 teaspoon melted butter, transfer to plate in oven, and cover plate tightly with aluminum foil. Repeat rolling and cooking remaining 3 dough balls. Once last naan is baked, serve immediately.

QUICKER INDIAN FLATBREAD (NAAN)

This variation, which can be prepared in about two hours, forgoes the overnight rest, but the dough may be a little harder to roll out.

After shaping dough in step 2, let dough rise at room temperature for 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, fold partially risen dough over itself 8 times by gently lifting and folding edge of dough toward middle, turning bowl 90 degrees after each fold. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise for 30 minutes. Repeat folding, turning, and rising one more time, for total of three 30-minute rises. After last rise, proceed with recipe from step 3.

INDIAN ORIGINAL

Traditionally, naan cooks against the superheated clay wall of a cylindrical tandoor. Heat radiating from the coals below also chars the exposed side, so the bread never needs to be flipped.

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