

Perfecting Rustic Dinner Rolls

Turning flour, water, and yeast into crusty, airy rolls is one of the hardest bits of kitchen wizardry around. We wanted to make the process foolproof.

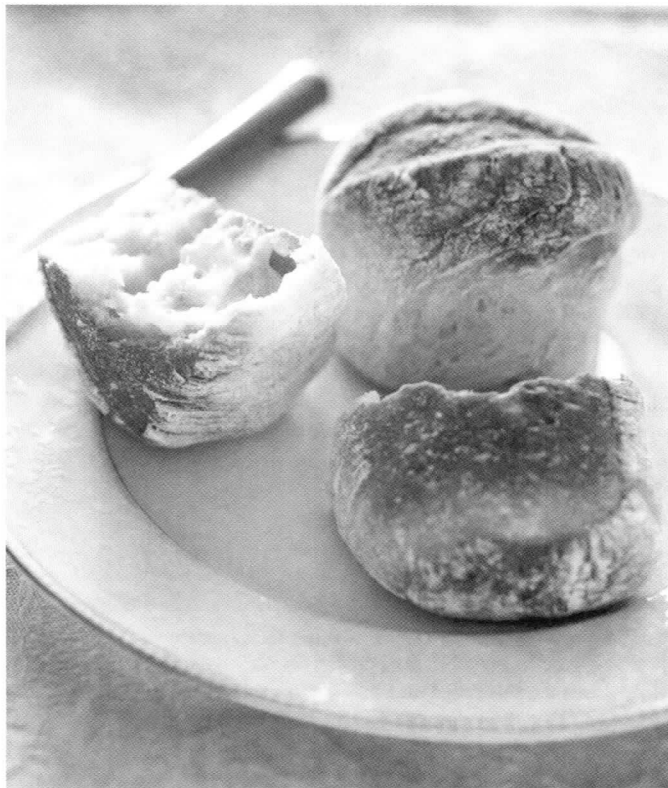
BY CHARLES KELSEY

I have always had a weakness for European-style dinner rolls. These lean, rustic rolls boast an airy crumb and yeasty, savory flavor worlds away from their richer American cousins. But the best part is their crust—so crisp it practically shatters when you bite into it, yet chewy enough to offer satisfying resistance.

This magnificent crust is what keeps these rolls the provenance of professionals, who typically rely on a steam-injected oven to expose the developing crust to moisture. I didn't have a steam-injected oven, but I did have a library of cookbooks and a kitchen full of experienced test cooks to consult. With these reinforcements and a little ingenuity, I was sure I could create a reliable recipe for rustic dinner rolls that looked—and tasted—like they came from an artisanal bakery.

Roll Calls

After testing various recipes, I found the best rolls had two things in common: no butter or oil, and the use of bread flour instead of all-purpose. This made sense, as fat inhibits gluten formation while the higher protein content of bread flour encourages it. (Gluten is the network of proteins that gives bread its chew.) For a working recipe, I settled on 3 cups bread flour, 10 ounces water, 1¼ teaspoons instant yeast, and salt. Following bread-making protocol, I mixed and kneaded the dough in a stand mixer, then transferred it to a bowl to rise. A couple hours later, I shaped the dough into balls, let them



Our rolls feature a chewy, bubbly crumb that's worlds apart from the soft, dense interior of typical American-style rolls.

rise briefly, and baked them in a 425-degree oven.

My first batch emerged looking the part, with appealingly burnished exteriors. When I broke open a roll, however, I discovered a dense, bland crumb beneath a thin, leathery crust. The flavor was easy enough to improve; replacing 3 tablespoons of bread

flour with whole wheat flour contributed subtle earthiness, while 2 teaspoons honey (tasters preferred it over molasses or sugar) added some sweetness yet left the rolls' savory profile intact. On to the next task: creating an airy crumb.

Liquid Assets

First I tried increasing the yeast, hoping that more rise would open up the crumb. But I was able to add only a scant ¼ teaspoon before the rolls took on a sour, fermented flavor. This modest addition provided some lift, but not enough.

That's when two fellow test cooks suggested making the dough wetter. Their logic was simple: During baking, the water within the dough turns to steam, creating hollow pockets as moisture rushes to escape. In addition, extra water creates looser dough, which allows the steam bubbles to expand more easily. The higher the hydration level, the theory goes, the airier the crumb.

Determining the hydration of my dough to be nearly 60 percent (the water's weight divided by the flour's weight), I assembled several batches of dough with varying amounts of water. Sure enough, increasing the hydration opened the crumb considerably.

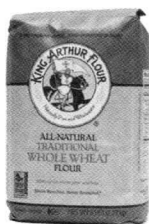
Working my way up, I found about 72 percent hydration to be optimal before the dough started getting too wet to shape into rolls. (By contrast, our Best American Dinner Roll dough, September/October 2006, with its tight, tender crumb, has around 53 percent hydration.)

From past experience, I knew that giving the dough a couple turns (gently folding it over on itself when partially risen) would encourage the yeast to produce more carbon dioxide, creating even more bubbles in the dough and thus an airier crumb. (For more information, see "One Good Turn," page 30.) This technique was indeed effective, yielding the airiest and chewiest texture yet.

A Half-Baked Plan

Using more water improved the finished rolls, but it also made the dough extremely sticky, oozy, and hard to shape. In fact, the very process of forming rolls sometimes caused the delicate dough to deflate, making its texture too dense. Wondering if I could forgo

Secrets of Rustic Dinner Rolls



WHOLE WHEAT FLOUR
A little whole wheat flour contributes nice earthiness.



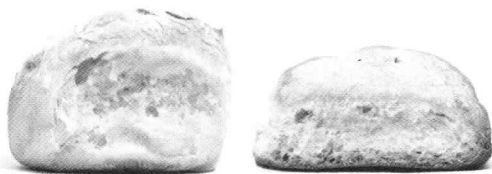
BIT O' HONEY
Honey adds subtle sweetness while leaving the savory profile of the rolls intact.



VERY WET DOUGH
Lots of water in the dough means more steam bubbles during baking and, in turn, an airier crumb.

A Burst of (Oven) Spring

Cranking up the heat when the rolls go into the oven maximizes what professional bakers call “oven spring,” the rapid rise in volume that all yeasted dough experiences when it first hits a hot oven. The higher this initial lift, the higher the finished bread.



HIGHER HEAT=
HIGHER RISE

LOWER HEAT=
LESS LIFT

shaping altogether, I tried using a bench scraper to divide the dough into rough (but even) pieces. Bingo! With less handling, these rolls retained far more of the open texture I had taken such pains to achieve. Still, a problem remained: how to keep the soft dough from spreading and baking into a squat shape.

I flirted with the idea of baking the pieces in a muffin tin—but who wants a dinner roll shaped like a breakfast item? Moving on, I tried crowding the dough in a cake pan. I coated these pieces lightly with flour to keep them from fusing together during baking and to make them easier to pull apart afterward. This batch looked good, but the spots where the rolls had rested against each other stayed soft. The solution: I removed the rolls from the oven halfway through baking, pulled them apart, and returned them to the oven spaced out on a baking sheet. With this two-stage baking method, they finished uniformly golden and crisp.

My rolls were now airy, with excellent flavor and an appealing shape. But I still wasn't satisfied with their crust. I wanted the shattering crispness I'd admired on rustic dinner rolls from good bakeries. We had achieved just such a crust on our Almost No-Knead Bread (January/February 2008) by using a Dutch oven to trap steam. But this seemed impractical for my two-stage baking method (who wants to reach into a hot pot to pluck out rolls?), plus, fitting all the pieces would require multiple Dutch ovens.

Playing around with oven temperature, I tried an old baking technique (popularized by Fannie Farmer in the late 19th century) of starting the rolls at a high temperature, then reducing the heat to finish them. Instead of 20 minutes at 425 degrees, I baked the rolls at 500 degrees for 10 minutes, separated them on a baking sheet, and lowered the heat to 400 degrees. This initial blast of heat made

all the difference between a so-so crust and one with real crackling crispness. It had another advantage—boosting the oven spring (the rise that yeasted dough experiences when it first hits the heat of the oven), so the crumb was even airier than before. Misting the rolls with water before baking (a nod to steam-injected ovens) made the crust even crisper. Finally, I had rustic dinner rolls from my home oven. Light, chewy, and shatteringly crisp, with a perfectly airy crumb, they could give any artisanal bakery rolls a run for the money.

RUSTIC DINNER ROLLS

MAKES 16 ROLLS

Because this dough is sticky, keep your hands well floured when handling it. Use a spray bottle to mist the rolls with water. The rolls will keep for up to 2 days at room temperature stored in a zipper-lock bag. To re-crisp the crust, place the rolls in a 450-degree oven 6 to 8 minutes. The rolls will keep frozen for several months wrapped in foil and placed in a large zipper-lock bag. Thaw the rolls at room temperature and re-crisp using the instructions above.

- 1½ cups plus 1 tablespoon water (12½ ounces), room temperature
- 1½ teaspoons instant or rapid-rise yeast
- 2 teaspoons honey
- 3 cups plus 1 tablespoon bread flour (16½ ounces), plus extra for forming rolls
- 3 tablespoons whole wheat flour (about 1 ounce)
- 1½ teaspoons table salt

1. Whisk water, yeast, and honey in bowl of stand mixer until well combined, making sure no honey sticks to bottom of bowl. Add flours and mix on low speed with dough hook until cohesive dough is formed, about 3 minutes. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature 30 minutes.

2. Remove plastic wrap and evenly sprinkle salt over dough. Knead on low speed (speed 2 on KitchenAid) 5 minutes. (If dough creeps up attachment, stop mixer and scrape down using well-floured hands or greased spatula.) Increase speed to medium and continue to knead until dough is smooth and slightly tacky, about 1 minute. If dough is very sticky, add 1 to 2 tablespoons flour and continue mixing 1 minute. Lightly spray 2-quart bowl with nonstick cooking spray; transfer dough to bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let dough rise in warm, draft-free place until doubled in size, about 1 hour.

3. Fold dough over itself; rotate bowl quarter turn and fold again. Rotate bowl again and fold once more. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise 30 minutes. Repeat folding, replace plastic wrap, and let dough rise until doubled in volume, about 30 minutes. Spray two 9-inch round cake pans with nonstick cooking spray and set aside.

4. Transfer dough to floured work surface, sprinkle top with more flour. Using bench scraper, cut dough

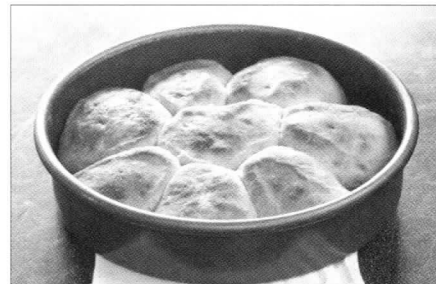
in half and gently stretch each half into 16-inch cylinders. Divide each cylinder into quarters, then each quarter into 2 pieces (you should have 16 pieces total), and dust top of each piece with more flour. With floured hands, gently pick up each piece and roll in palms to coat with flour, shaking off excess, and place in prepared cake pan. Arrange 8 dough pieces in each cake pan, placing one piece in middle and others around it, with long side of each piece running from center of pan to edge and making sure cut-side faces up. Loosely cover cake pans with plastic wrap and let rolls rise until doubled in size, about 30 minutes (dough is ready when it springs back slowly when pressed lightly with finger). Thirty minutes before baking, adjust rack to middle position and heat oven to 500 degrees.

5. Remove plastic wrap from cake pans, spray rolls lightly with water, and place in oven. Bake 10 minutes until tops of rolls are brown; remove from oven. Reduce oven temperature to 400 degrees; using kitchen towels or oven mitts, invert rolls from both cake pans onto rimmed baking sheet. When rolls are cool enough to handle, turn right-side up, pull apart, and space evenly on baking sheet. Continue to bake until rolls develop deep golden brown crust and sound hollow when tapped on bottom, 10 to 15 minutes; rotating baking sheet halfway through baking time. Transfer rolls to wire rack and cool to room temperature, about 1 hour.

TECHNIQUE

BROWNED ALL AROUND

For uniformly crisp, golden rolls, we devised a two-step baking process.



1. Partially baking the rolls in a cake pan helps set their shape but leaves soft spots where they touch.



2. Separating the rolls and returning them to the oven on a baking sheet ensures finished rolls that are golden and crisp all around.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Rustic Dinner Rolls

VIDEO TIPS

- Why free-form rustic dinner rolls are better
- How can I tell when my dough is properly proofed?