

Creating whole wheat bread at home

By Mark Bittman, New York Times

Those of us who cook believe that you have to cook to eat; baking bread is different. With so many relatively decent loaves readily available in stores, bread-baking is more of a hobby.

The result, of course, will be eaten and enjoyed – and bakers know the rewards of blowing people’s minds with a good loaf: “You made that?” – but baking is not mandatory. (I say that having just paid four bucks for a “baguette” that would serve better as a kitchen sponge.)

As with any practice, baking gets better over time. But the odd thing about bread-making is that any epiphanies you have along the way are only temporarily gratifying. You always make progress, but then your standard rises, and in the end baking provides that oddly addictive combination of satisfaction and frustration.

Producing a great baguette is an art, but whole-grain bread is real sustenance, and I wanted good ones in my repertory. So over the past few years, I’ve challenged myself to make 100 percent whole-grain bread, and to make it delicious.

There are three reasons that my whole-grain breads have become better: the food processor, the overnight rise and the sourdough starter. And they all involve abandoning kneading. Kneading dough by hand for 20 minutes – as was the practice when I first started baking – was never actually necessary (few home bakers knew that), but a requirement of a particular kind of bread made in a relatively hurried fashion using a relatively large amount of domesticated (that is, store-bought) yeast.

That hurried method was, as far as I can tell, perfected (I say this in the sense that it truly cannot get any better) by Charles Van Over in his book, "The Best Bread Ever," published in 1997 and set to be revised as an ebook this fall. Van Over makes the best home baguettes of anyone I've ever met. In any case, both the "not-quite-whole-grain bread" and whole-wheat focaccia recipes are adaptations (by me, not Van Over) of his technique. The key "ingredient" in Van Over's method, aside from his precision, is the food processor, which "kneads" the dough in 45 seconds, developing gluten in much the same way an overnight rise does.

The overnight rise is at the heart of my second revelation, a result of my well-known (to bread bakers, anyway) encounter with Jim Lahey of Sullivan Street Bakery in SoHo. Lahey slowed the process down, reducing the yeast and combining a slow rise and an oven-within-an-oven baking method described in his book, "My Bread" (written with Rick Flaste, a former *Times* editor). This method essentially replaces kneading with time and takes at least 12 hours. (For further discussion, consult "No-Knead Bread," which ran in the *Times* in November 2006, along with the hundreds of blog posts, comments and wonderful, thoughtful variations it spurred.)

Finally, I came to the realization that great 100 percent whole-grain bread can be made only with sourdough (it's about the difference between how whole grains respond to store-bought yeast and how they respond to acid, or a combination of acid and wild yeast), and I discovered that via a combination of driving other people crazy with questions and a recipe from "The Scandinavian Cookbook," by my friend Trine Hahnemann. When I visited Hahnemann just over a year ago, I requested a lesson in Danish rye and got one. That plus her recipe has propelled me at least halfway up the mountain.

The recipe here is, again, an adaptation, though it's close to her original. The sourdough method, which I have found to be the most reliable way to produce a starter, is from "Bread

Alone," by Daniel Leader and Judith Blahnik, a fine bread-baking book that gets a bit technical for me. (If you find my route overly simplistic, buy "Bread Alone.") Sourdough rye requires time: a few days to make the starter, and 12 hours or so every time you want to make bread. But kneading? No.

For those who like a dense, chewy, flavorful loaf, Hahnemann's rye is the find of a lifetime. You can make it lighter in texture and color by using a touch of white flour in place of whole wheat, though to me that defeats the purpose. You can make it darker in color – gorgeously so – by adding roasted malt powder. Seeds – fennel, caraway, anise – add flavor. If it's too chewy for you, use flour in place of cracked rye. Finally – and this may be hard to believe – it's best when wrapped in plastic and cured for a day before eating.

The other two breads here are based on Van Over's technique, and the not-quite whole grain includes a fair approximation of his original recipe. If ever there was a reason for you to splurge on a kitchen scale, this is it: there is real precision here, and if you follow the instructions to the gram, you will produce very good bread.

So why don't all baguettes incorporate the complexity of whole grains? The problem is that there is a limit to how much whole grain you can add to a bread and still make a light loaf with a crisp, shattering crust and an interior that pulls pleasantly. Whole grain has benefits and charms of its own, but it does not respond to yeast the way white flour does. Adding something like 10 percent of whole wheat or rye or barley flour to a white dough gives you something like what the French call pain complet, but it's not complet at all; it's just white bread with a little whole wheat in it, like the stuff they sell in stores. Adding 20 or 30 percent gives you a distinctive loaf that has the benefits of both, and it has become my standard. Adding 50 percent or more pretty much robs you of the reasons you started with white flour in the first place. If that's what you want, make sourdough, or

cheat.

The last recipe here, the whole-grain focaccia, is the cheat. I won't apologize for it – I make it often – but it's not in the same league as these others. By upping the amount of yeast, using the food processor and incorporating relatively large amounts of fat (in the form of olive oil), you can make a 100 percent whole-wheat focaccia (other shapes, including baguettes, will also work, but I like it best as a puffy flatbread) in a minimum of time. Really, the best treatment for whole grain is sourdough. But if you're in a hurry, greatness takes second place.