



Absolutely No-Knead Crusty-Chewy Bread

This recipe is one you'll find yourself making over and over again. First, it's incredibly easy. And second—just because it's so easy—it's fun to try variations. Add seeds. Substitute some whole wheat flour. What about stirring in toasted pecans? Go for it! All you need is four basic ingredients; a bowl; a spoon; a covered crock, and a hot oven. Please read all the way through this recipe before starting. There's lots of good information along the way; and you need to be sure you have the proper crock for baking.



5 cups (22 1/2 ounces) Sir Lancelot Hi-Gluten Flour*

1/4 teaspoon instant yeast

2 1/4 teaspoons salt

2 3/4 cups (22 ounces) cool water

*We've also used King Arthur all-purpose and bread flours, but find Lancelot gives the highest rise and nicest texture. If you use all-purpose flour, reduce the water to 2 1/2 cups. For bread flour, use 2 2/3 cups water. Why? In any given yeast bread recipe, the higher the gluten level, the more liquid needed to create the desired texture.

First, decide on a timeframe. The dough is stirred together; rests for 10 hours; is put into the crock; rises for 2 hours, and bakes for 45 minutes. So that's just under 13 hours. It's a good weekend bread; stir it together Friday night at about 10 p.m.; scoop it into the crock about 8 a.m. Saturday; bake about 10 a.m., and your bread will be baked, cooled, and ready to slice for sandwiches by noon. Or get up early on Saturday to stir up the dough at 6 a.m.; put it into the crock at 4 p.m.; bake at 6 p.m., and serve fresh and hot from the oven at 7 p.m.

Next, select your crock. Ceramic/stoneware, cast iron, or glass all work; the key is that the crock must have a lid. A Dutch oven is a good choice. The crock we used for this recipe is a 4 1/4-quart capacity, 9 1/2"-diameter, 4"-deep round stoneware crock with lid. See if you can find something of a similar shape; baking times will be affected if the crock is shallower/wider, or narrower/deeper.

Place all of the ingredients in a large bowl, large enough for the dough to double in size. Stir to combine. At first the dough will stick to the spoon and follow it around the bowl. But once all the flour is completely absorbed (after about 10 seconds of

vigorous stirring), the dough will become softer and stick to the sides of the bowl. That's it; you're done stirring. Cover the bowl, and set it aside to rest at cool room temperature for 10 hours. If it's very hot and humid, leave it in the cellar, or in an air-conditioned room; someplace that's about 68°F to 70°F is ideal.

After 10 hours, the dough should be very bubbly, and will have risen quite a bit. Grease your chosen crock with non-stick vegetable oil spray, and then rub with a bit of olive oil, for flavor. Be sure it's well-greased; the last thing you want is for the baked bread to stick in the crock. Gently stir the dough down; this redistributes the yeast, giving it new life. Scoop the dough into the greased crock. Place the lid on the crock, and let the dough rise for 2 hours at cool room temperature. Towards the end of the rising time, preheat your oven to 450°F.

Peek at the dough before putting it in the oven; it should be very bubbly, and nicely risen. If you don't think it's risen enough, give it some more time. If it rose too much, then fell, bake it anyway; it'll be dense, but chewy and flavorful. Note that the bread won't rise any farther, once it's in the oven; what you see is what you get. It also won't dome, but instead will form a flat top surface.

Bake the bread for 45 minutes with the lid on. Remove the lid and bake for an additional 4 to 5 minutes, till the top is a deep, golden brown. Remove the crock from the oven, and turn the bread out onto a rack to cool. PLEASE don't slice into it till it's just barely warm; slicing hot bread makes it irretrievably gummy. When fresh, the bread's crust is crisp, and the interior chewy; as it rests, the crust will gradually become chewy, as well. If desired, refresh slices in a toaster; or wrap gently in foil, and warm for 5 to 10 minutes in a preheated 350°F oven.

Yield: one round loaf.

Variation: We've also tried kneading this bread dough in a bread machine or mixer, rather than simply stirring it. The resulting loaf has a higher, rounder crown.