

Jim Lahey's No-Work Bread

Makes: 1 large loaf

Time: Nearly 24 hours, almost completely unattended

This innovation—the word recipe does not do the technique justice—came from Jim Lahey, owner of Sullivan Street Bakery in New York City. Jim has created a way for home cooks (and not even ones who are serious bakers) to nearly duplicate an artisan bakery loaf, with a crackling crust, open-holed crumb, light texture, and fantastic flavor. All without kneading, fancy ingredients, or special equipment. A wet dough and slow fermentation are the keys to success, as is the baking method—a heated covered pot, which creates essentially an oven within an oven to trap steam as the bread bakes. This is the original, simplest version, though many people have tinkered with the formula since it was first published in 2006. I'm not kidding when I say the results will blow your mind. The only thing required is forethought. Ideally, you will start the dough about 24 hours before you plan to eat it; you can cut that to 12 and even 9 (see the variation), but you'll be sacrificing some of the yeasty flavor and open crumb.

4 cups all-purpose or bread flour, plus flour for dusting

Scant ½ teaspoon instant yeast

2 teaspoons salt

2 cups water at about 70°F

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil (optional)

Cornmeal, semolina, or wheat bran as needed

1. Combine the flour, yeast, and salt in a large bowl. Add the water and stir until blended; you'll have a shaggy, sticky dough (add a little more water if it seems dry). Cover the bowl with plastic wrap or put the olive oil in a second large bowl, transfer the dough to that, turn to coat with oil, and cover with plastic wrap. Let the dough rest for about 18 hours at about 70°F. The dough is ready when its surface is dotted with bubbles. Rising time will be shorter at warmer temperatures, a bit longer if your kitchen is 60–65°F.

2. Lightly flour a work surface, remove the dough, and fold once or twice; it will be soft but, once sprinkled with flour, not terribly sticky. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and let rest for about 15 minutes.

3. Using just enough flour to keep the dough from sticking, gently and quickly shape the dough into a ball. Generously coat a cotton (not terry cloth) towel with cornmeal or wheat bran (or use a silicone baking mat); put the dough seam side down on the towel and dust with more flour or cornmeal. Cover with another cotton towel (or plastic wrap) and let rise for about 2 hours. When it's ready, the dough will be more than doubled in size and won't spring back readily when poked with your finger.

4. At least a half hour before the dough is ready, heat the oven to 450°F. Put a 3- to 4-quart covered pot (with the cover)—it may be cast-iron, enamel, Pyrex, or ceramic—in the oven as it heats. When the dough is ready, carefully remove the pot from the oven and turn the dough over into the pot, seam side up. (Slide your hand under the towel and just turn the dough over into the pot; it's messy, and it probably won't fall in artfully, but it will straighten out as it bakes.) Cover with the lid and bake for 30 minutes, then remove the lid and bake for another 20 to 30 minutes, until the loaf is beautifully browned. (If at any point the dough starts to smell scorched, lower the heat a bit.) Remove the bread with a spatula or tongs and cool on a rack for at least 30 minutes before slicing.