

Classic French Brioche

This is a traditional French recipe for classic sweet breakfast or dessert bread made from a flour, egg, butter and milk dough leavened with yeast that's allowed to raise very slowly and glazed with egg before baking. The classic French brioche has a reputation as not being very easy to prepare and this is why it so often seems to be excluded from the lists of various recipe sites. It took me a while to develop the process for this recipe but I now have it down pat and this is a recipe for a moderately rich brioche (the richer the mixture the more difficult it is to handle. Start with less rich mixtures and work your way up to the very butter-rich versions).

Ingredients:

225g flour
15g yeast
1 tsp salt
2 tsp sugar
2 eggs
90g butter, softened
3 tbsp milk beaten egg, for the glaze

Directions:

Sift the flour into a heap on your work surface (a stone worktop or pastry slab is best). Divide into four equal portions with a knife and draw one of these portions towards you. Form this pile of flour into a heap and form a well in the centre. Crumble the yeast into the depression and gradually mix with 2 tbsp warm water. Use your fingers to gradually draw the water into the flour, working from the base of the pile upwards. Mix until smooth (add more water if needed) and roll into a ball of soft dough. You need a pan of warm water (this is to activate the yeast and should be warm and not hot. If you can't comfortably put your hand in the water it's too hot. But if it's too cold then the yeast won't activate (about 40°C is ideal). Take off the heat and set on your work surface. Using a pair of kitchen scissors snip across the top of the dough ball so the pieces of dough fall into the pan. They will immediately sink to the bottom but will rise to the surface as the yeast activates. Sprinkle the salt and sugar onto the remaining three piles of flour and bring together into a heap. Form a well in the centre and break the eggs into this. Mix the flour into the egg and then add just enough milk to

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form a fairly firm paste. The next part is the trickiest, both to describe and to do and will take some practice. You need to make the dough you have elastic. Initially it will be sticky and will adhere to your fingers but as you work it it will become more elastic and more liquid. Don't scrape the dough from your fingers as you work it, because this will defeat the whole purpose. Stick your fingers in the dough and draw some out with a twisting motion of your hand. Aggressively flick the dough from your fingers back into the pile. Repeat this process until the dough becomes liquid and elastic and no longer sticks to your fingers. Now work the softened butter with your fingers into the dough until completely incorporated. Lift the dough from the work surface with a palette knife and place into a floured bowl. The trick now is to get the worked dough from the work surface ready at the same time as the risen yeast mixture in the saucepan (this will take some practice but, typically the dough in the pan of water is ready in about 8 to 10 minutes [it will have doubled in size and risen to the top of the pan]). Using your hand with fingers slightly spread scoop the sections of risen dough from the water and drain on kitchen paper before placing in the bowl with the worked dough. Mix to combine the doughs together then cover with a damp cloth and place in a warm spot to raise for about 3 hours. After this time knock the dough back (it will be the consistency of stiffly-whipped cream). Transfer the bowl to a refrigerator and chill for about 5 hours (if you don't do this the dough will not be stiff enough to be worked). Alternatively you can place the dough, without rising, into the refrigerator over night. When sufficiently chilled turn the dough out onto a lightly-floured surface and knead lightly. Then form into a roll and divide with your hands into pieces about the size of a hen's egg. Cut off about a third of each dough and roll the remainder into balls. Place these in the well greased cups of brioche tins then make an incision in the top of each ball with a sharp knife. Take the third of pastry you cut off and roll into small balls before using the flat of your hand to shape them into little 'tails'. Press the tails into the hole you made in the brioche and lay the tails down. Set the trays in a warm place for 20 minutes to prove (eg in a cool oven over a tray of water) then brush with the beaten egg and place in an oven pre-heated to 210°C and bake for about 15 minutes, or until nut brown on top. Allow to cool in the tins for 10 minutes, before transferring to a wire rack to cool completely.

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