

Focaccia: Basic Dough for Flatbreads or Loaves

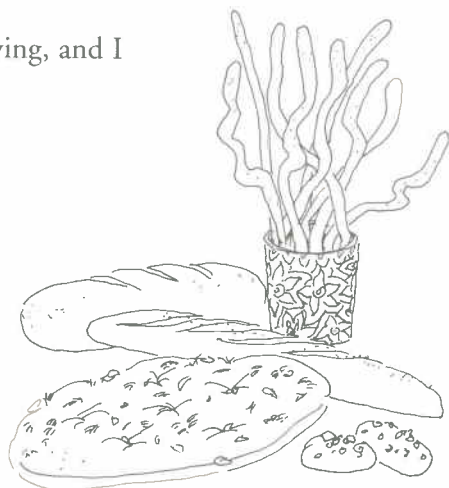
1 LARGE OR 2 SMALL LOAVES; 1 LARGE OR 2 SMALL FOCACCIE

This user-friendly dough is about as basic as you can get. It was the dough that inspired me to start my bakery in Los Angeles and was the dough that everyone seems to like. One morning at the Farmer's Market in Santa Monica, when I was setting up my bread concession, I dropped a focaccetta (sandwich size) in the street and watched with horror, as did several others, as a pickup truck, Mercedes, and large van rolled over the just-baked bun. We could actually see its shape spring back, resilient and just as fresh as ever, much like the Samsonite luggage that when dropped from thirty stories bounces back without a scratch! This is very hardy dough.

With it you can make loaves of bread, flatbreads, crisp breads, little sandwich buns (focaccette), the French ladder bread fougasse, exotic hamburger buns, bread sticks, and more. You can also forget it in the refrigerator or leave it to rise a little too long and it will bounce back very easily,

even after the Mack truck is gone. It is very forgiving, and I have witnesses to prove it.

- 2 cups lukewarm water (85 to 95°F)
- 2 teaspoons active dry yeast
- 4 cups unbleached bread flour
- 2 to 3 teaspoons salt
- 2 to 3 teaspoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 teaspoon kosher or sea salt



Focaccia dough can be used for every shape

Measure the water into a large bowl. Sprinkle the yeast over the water and stir until dissolved. Stir in 2 cups of the flour and the salt and stir briskly until smooth, about 2 minutes. With a strong wooden spoon or one of those rare mixing spoons with a big hole in the middle, stir in the remaining 2 cups of flour for about 2 minutes longer, just until the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl and the flour is incorporated. The dough will be fairly wet and tacky (sticky), but when it pulls away from the sides of the bowl and forms a loose ball, you'll know the dough has been stirred sufficiently. If it seems too sticky, stir in an additional $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of flour.

Same day method: Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the dough rise in a warm place until doubled in volume, 30 to 40 minutes. Proceed with the shaping instructions.

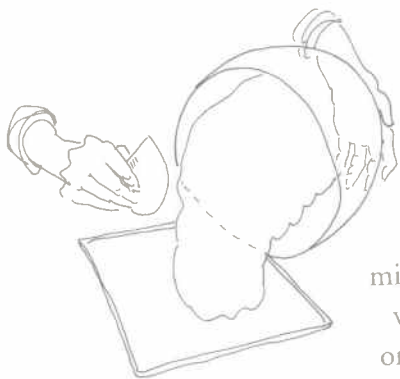
Overnight method: Cover the bowl and refrigerate overnight. The dough will rise in the refrigerator and acquire flavor from the slower yeast action. Remove the dough 2 hours before shaping and let stand, covered, in a warm place. The dough will rise for the second time. Proceed with the shaping instructions.

To shape into loaves: Preheat the oven to 500°F. Oil a seasoned nonstick, oven-proof 9-inch skillet or two 5-inch skillets.

Pour the dough into the large pan or divide it equally between the two small-

continued

er pans by loosening the dough with a spatula and then carefully scraping it from the sides of the bowl, keeping the dough as inflated as possible. If you are using two pans, cut the dough off at the edge of the bowl with the spatula as it falls into each pan. The shape that the dough takes on as it falls into the pan is fine. Brush the tops of loaves with olive oil, sprinkle with rosemary and sea salt, and set aside to rise until doubled, about 15 to 20 minutes.



Cut dough off at edge of bowl.

To bake loaves: Place the bread in the preheated oven and reduce the oven temperature to 400°F. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes or until nicely browned and the loaf sounds hollow when tapped with your finger. Remove loaf from pan and cool on a rack.

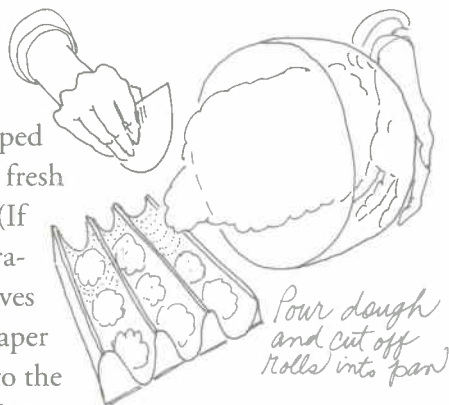
To shape into focaccia: Preheat the oven to 500°F. Oil one or two nonstick 13-by-18-inch baking sheets.

Pour the dough onto the sheet(s), carefully scraping it from the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula. Brush the dough with 2 teaspoons of olive oil. To make the traditional focaccia with indentations, dip your fingers into cold water or olive oil and insert them straight down into the dough. Make holes in the dough by pulling it to the sides about 1 inch at a time. Pull the holes at random to form little craters all over with the pan showing through where you have put your fingers. As you work, stretch the dough into a 1-inch-thick oval. (If you are using just one baking sheet, the focaccia will cover almost the entire sheet.) Brush the loaf with another teaspoon of olive oil and sprinkle with the rosemary and sea salt. Focaccia does not need to rise, but if you forget it for a few minutes, don't worry. It will bake beautifully despite a little neglect.

To shape into dinner rolls: This is the easiest way to make rolls with any dough. Follow the instructions for the Overnight Method. Preheat the oven to 500°F. Spray a French bread pan with nonstick spray or rub with olive oil. A 3-section pan will yield 9 or 12 rolls, depending on the size you choose to cut off.

Take a good handful of the chilled dough and gently stretch it out into a rectangle approximately 2 inches wide and 8 inches long. Snip off 2-inch pieces

of dough and drop them into the grooves in the pan, using three to a groove. You may shape them after cutting if you like, but I prefer the free-form look of the unshaped rolls. Brush with olive oil and sprinkle with fresh rosemary. Let rise until doubled in volume. (If you wish to make rolls from room-temperature dough, pour the dough into the grooves of the pan, cutting off the dough with a scraper after a 3-inch piece of dough has “fallen” into the groove. Proceed again down the groove, letting the dough fall into its roll shape [see illustration]. Rolls made like this need to rise only for about 15 minutes before baking. They will have a good spring and be very tender with a crisp crust.)



*Pour dough
and cut off
rolls into pan*

To bake the focaccia and rolls: Place the pan(s) in the oven and reduce the oven temperature to 450°F. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until the focaccia has a nice, golden-brown color mixed with a little darker brown around the indented area. Bake the rolls for 12 to 15 minutes, or until golden brown on top. Cool on a wire rack. Cut focaccia into wedges or rectangles and serve warm.

NOTE: For a breakfast focaccia, mix 1 teaspoon cinnamon with 1 cup coarse brown sugar and sprinkle over focaccia in place of rosemary and salt.