

French Toast Stuffed with a Creamy Filling

For a do-ahead breakfast, stuff the bread the night before; the next morning, just sauté and bake

BY DONNA LEAHY

No matter what else I put on the breakfast menu, my repeat guests all request the same thing: stuffed French toast. That's probably because they've learned that stuffed French toast is the chameleon of my menu—never the same, yet always delicious. I've been serving it at my inn in Pennsylvania Dutch Country for ten years, and I'm still coming up with new renditions.

Once you know the method, you too will want to experiment, combining cheeses for an innovative filling, trying out a new kind of bread, or turning a favorite fruit preserve into a warm glaze. Stuffed French toast is ideal for entertaining since you can do most of the work ahead. In fact, the dish benefits from a night in the refrigerator. The bread absorbs more of its eggy coating, and the filling firms up for better texture.

Choose the bread and think through the filling

You'll need a loaf of unsliced bread so you can cut extra-thick slices and make a pocket to hold the filling. Choose bread with a texture that's firm enough to



To make the pocket, insert a sharp knife into the center of the top crust of the bread and then work the knife in both directions, cutting to within $\frac{3}{4}$ inch of the sides and bottom. Be careful not to puncture the sides.



Squeeze the bread gently to part the opening. Spoon in a few tablespoons of the room-temperature filling, being careful not to overstuff or tear the bread. Wipe any extra filling from the opening with a clean paper towel.



Dunk the stuffed bread in a mixture of egg and heavy cream to fully coat each side. Stand the slices in a baking dish, cover, and refrigerate overnight.



Out of the frying pan, into the oven. Sauté, bake until heated through, and serve.



A hint at what's to come. Peeking out of these just-baked cinnamon bread slices is a sweet, creamy apricot and three-cheese filling.

hold up to a bit of handling but that's still light enough to absorb the egg coating. Challah is a fine choice, and I find that Italian or French breads with soft crusts are also good. Here in Amish country, I can get loaves of unsliced raisin or cinnamon bread; if you have a favorite bakery bread that isn't too dense, try it out.

In classic French toast, or *pain perdu*, the bread surrenders itself completely to the egg dip. But in stuffed French toast, the super-thick slices of bread don't soak up as much egg, so it's the filling and the syrup that deliver most of the flavor and moisture.

I like to combine two cheeses in the filling, such as cream cheese, sour cream, ricotta, or perhaps mascarpone. I also use grated hard cheeses like Cheddar and Monterey Jack, a crumbly cheese like Gorgonzola, or a softer cheese like chèvre. You can mix and match, but be aware that too much cream cheese can overwhelm the other flavors. The filling should be fairly stiff since it has to withstand a quick sauté and several minutes in the oven. Test a new filling by baking a bit in a small ramekin for about eight minutes. It should be somewhat firm, not too loose or runny.

Enhance the base filling with fruit and spices. If you're using fruit, choose those that benefit from baking, like apples and pears. Save softer fruits like strawberries and raspberries to use in the syrup or as a garnish. Fruit preserves, citrus zests, and flavor extracts are good additions. Avoid using fruit juices: they'll make the filling too runny. The most important thing is to consider each component of the dish to be sure you don't have clashing flavors.

While the bread bakes, prepare the syrup

Slice the bread thickly, make a pocket, stuff the bread and dip it into the egg mixture following the photos at left. Sometimes I add a crunchy coating as well, like cornmeal or ground nuts. If you're assembling the dish the night before, put the stuffed, dipped bread in a baking dish, cover tightly with foil, and refrigerate.

In the morning, sauté the bread until golden brown and then bake until the filling is heated through. Depending on the filling, the bread may puff up ever so slightly. Be careful not to overbake or the bread will dry out and the filling will get too runny.

You can prepare any syrups or toppings ahead, but mine are so simple that I make them while the stuffed French toast bakes. I use fresh fruit syrups or warmed preserves to complement sweet fillings. In some cases, pure maple syrup is a fine match, too. When the stuffed French toast is ready, spoon on the syrup and sit down to enjoy the dish—and the accolades.

RECIPES

Stuffed French Toast

Use one of my suggested fillings or invent one of your own. Serves six.

6 slices (1 1/2 inches thick) bread (challah, Italian, French, or other medium-textured loaf)
Prepared filling (recipes follow)

(Recipe continues)



Pass the syrup, please. Blueberry and apricot glazes are excellent with fruit-filled French toast, as is reduced apple cider spiked with cinnamon and cloves.



Coming apart at the seams? Not really, but this fully stuffed slice of challah French toast delivers some apple and cream cheese filling in every bite.

6 large eggs
½ cup heavy cream
1½ Tbs. unsalted butter
1½ Tbs. corn oil
Prepared syrup or glaze (recipes follow)

Create a pocket in each slice of bread by following the photos on p. 38. Spoon in 2 or 3 Tbs. of the prepared filling until the pocket is full but not bursting; the amount will depend on the size of bread. Tap the bread on the counter to settle the filling.

In a medium bowl, whisk the eggs and cream. Dip each slice of stuffed bread into the egg mixture, soaking each side for about 1 min. to coat well and evenly. Stand the pieces upright in a baking dish and drizzle with any remaining egg mixture. Cover and refrigerate.

When ready to serve, heat the oven to 375°F. Lightly grease a baking sheet. In a large skillet, heat the butter and oil over medium high until the butter is melted and foamy. Sauté as many pieces as will fit comfortably in the pan at one time, turning once, until golden brown on both sides, about 2 min. per side; the bread will puff up a bit. Continue with all pieces. Put the sautéed pieces on the greased baking sheet and bake until the filling is heated through, 6 to 8 min.

Excellent
Apple Filling with Cider Syrup

Use firm, slightly tart baking apples, such as Macintosh or Rome. I like to stuff this filling in raisin bread. *Yields 2¼ cups filling and 1 cup syrup.*

FOR THE FILLING:
8 oz. cream cheese, at room temperature
2 Tbs. sugar
½ tsp. ground cinnamon
¼ cup sour cream
1 cup coarsely chopped apple

FOR THE SYRUP:
1 cup apple cider
¾ cup light brown sugar
¼ tsp. ground cloves
½ tsp. ground cinnamon
2 Tbs. unsalted butter

no butter

To make the filling—In a medium bowl, combine the cream cheese, sugar, and cinnamon and beat with a hand mixer on high speed until smooth, scraping the sides of the bowl as necessary, about 1 min. Gently stir in the sour cream and apple until just combined.

To make the syrup—In a medium saucepan, whisk together the apple cider, brown sugar, cloves, and cinnamon. Bring the mixture just to a boil and then lower the heat and simmer until thickened and reduced to about 1 cup, 8 to 10 min. Stir in the butter until melted. Serve warm over stuffed French toast.

Excellent
Lemon Filling with Blueberry Syrup

If you can find mascarpone, replace the cream cheese with ¼ cup mascarpone and increase the ricotta to 1 cup. *Yields 1¼ cups filling and 1½ cups syrup.*

FOR THE FILLING:
4 oz. cream cheese, at room temperature
1 tsp. lemon extract
1 tsp. finely chopped lemon zest
2 Tbs. sugar
¾ cup part-skim ricotta

FOR THE SYRUP:
2 cups fresh (or frozen) blueberries
½ cup sugar
2 tsp. fresh lemon juice

To make the filling—In a medium bowl, combine the cream cheese, lemon extract, zest, and sugar and beat with a hand mixer on high speed until smooth, scraping the sides of the bowl as necessary, about 1 min. Gently stir in the ricotta until just combined.

To make the syrup—In a medium saucepan, combine the blueberries, sugar, and lemon juice. Heat over low heat, stirring constantly until the sugar dissolves, 2 to 3 min. Increase the heat and bring the mixture just to a boil. Lower the heat to a simmer and cook for another 2 min., stirring constantly. Remove from the heat. Serve warm over stuffed French toast.

Apricot Filling with Apricot Glaze

Cinnamon bread is great with this filling. *Yields 1½ cups filling and 1 cup glaze.*

FOR THE FILLING:
4 oz. cream cheese, at room temperature
¼ cup apricot preserves
¼ cup grated Monterey Jack cheese
¾ cup part-skim ricotta

FOR THE GLAZE:
1 cup apricot preserves
¼ cup brandy

To make the filling—In a medium bowl, beat the cream cheese with a hand mixer on high speed until smooth, scraping the sides of the bowl as necessary, about 1 min. Beat in the apricot preserves. Gently stir in the Monterey Jack and ricotta until just combined.

To make the glaze—In a small saucepan, combine the preserves and brandy. Bring the mixture just to a boil. Remove from the heat. Serve warm over stuffed French toast.

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