

Hot Cross Buns

Recipe courtesy of Evelyn Birge Vitz, *A Continual Feast*
(Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1985)

The Hot Cross Bun is the most famous, and probably the oldest, of the many English buns. Unlike today, when it is to be found throughout Lent, the Hot Cross Bun was originally eaten only on Good Friday. According to tradition, Father Rocliff, a monk and the cook of St. Alban's Abbey, in Hertfordshire, on Good Friday in 1361 gave to each poor person who came to the abbey one of these spiced buns marked with the sign of the cross, along with the usual bowl of soup. The custom was continued and soon spread throughout the country - though no other buns could compare, it was said, with Father Rocliff's. Hot Cross Buns became enormously popular in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Street cries were commonly heard on Good Friday:

*Hot Cross buns, Hot Cross buns,
One a penny, two a penny,
Hot Cross buns!
If your daughters won't eat them,
Give them to your sons;
But if you have none of those little elves,
Then you must eat them all yourselves!*

Hot Cross Buns had the reputation of never becoming moldy. As *Poor Robin's Almanac* for 1733 declared:

*Good Friday comes this month, the old woman runs
With one or two a penny hot cross buns,
Whose virtue is, if you believe what's said,
They'll not grow mouldy like the common bread.*

Hot Cross Buns, and other forms of Good Friday bread, were considered blessed, and were believed to provide powerful protection against disease and danger.

Ingredients:

- 1 package dry yeast
- 1/4 cup warm water (about 100-100 degrees F)
- 1 teaspoon white or light brown sugar

- 1 cup milk
- 1/2 cup sweet butter
- 1/3 cup brown or raw sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 4 to 4 1/2 cups sifted flour
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
- 2/3 cup dried currants
- Optional:
- 1/3 cup finely diced or julienned citron

Frosting:

- 2 tablespoons milk
- 4 tablespoons confectioners' sugar (more if needed)
- grated rind of 1 lemon

Directions:

Sprinkle the yeast into the lukewarm water. Stir in 1 teaspoon sugar. Let sit until frothy.

Scald the milk. Add the butter, sugar, and salt. Stir until blended. Cool to lukewarm. Beat the eggs until light, and combine with the milk mixture. Add the yeast.

Sift 3 1/2 cups of the flour with the spices into a mixing bowl. Make a well, and pour in the yeast mixture. Beat for 5 minutes. Toss the currants, and citron, if using it, with the remaining 1/2 cup of flour. Mix into the dough.

Place the dough on a lightly floured surface and knead until the dough is smooth and elastic, adding more flour if necessary. The dough should be fairly firm, otherwise it will not take the cuts for the cross.

Place the dough in a greased bowl, turning to grease the top. Cover the dough with a towel and put it to rise in a draft-free spot until doubled in volume. This will take about 2 hours.

Punch the dough down. Shape it into 2 dozen buns.

Place the buns 1 1/2 to 2 inches apart on well-greased cookie sheets or in muffin pans. With a sharp knife cut a cross into the top of each bun. Allow them to rise until doubled in bulk, 30-45 minutes.

Bake at 400 degrees F for about 20 minutes.

For the frosting, mix the milk with enough sugar so that the icing is not runny. Add the rind. Brush a cross on the top of each bun.

Yield: about 24 buns

Variations:

Try varying the spice ratios: for example, eliminate the cinnamon, and use only the other spices (increasing the quantities proportionately). You can also substitute allspice for the ginger.

Eliminate the icing: the icing on Hot Cross Buns is considered by some purists to be new-fangled.