

Baking and Breaking Bread with The Artisan's Hall

Bread Fit for a Wood-fired Oven

6 cups (900 grams) of whole wheat flour

2 goodly pinches of salt

2 1/4 cups lukewarm water

2 good dollops of honey

Ale Barm (Real or simulated*)

Add herbs if desired: Fresh rosemary is particularly nice.

Make your ale barm (see sidebar) and sit the water and honey atop the warming oven to dissolve the honey into the water.

Mix dry ingredients into a large work bowl. Make a well in the center and add your warmed water/honey mixture and your barmy concoction.

Get your hands in there and start to bring it together into a dough. It will be sticky.

When it starts to come together into a ball, turn it out onto a floured bread board or kneading trough and knead for a good 15-20 twenty minutes or until the dough has absorbed all the flour it's going to and has formed a tight skin. Add herbs if you are going to during the halfway through kneading.

Divide into four small loaves and let rest under a towel in a warm spot under a rhododendron or apple tree (apple trees are a traditional resting place for rising bread, apple peels are rich in wild yeast) and leave it alone for two hours.

Preheat oven to 450° F, then bake at 325° F. (This simulates the high heat and steep fall-off seen in a wood-fired oven) approximately 45 minutes.

If you are using a wood-fired oven

The oven should be heated while the bread is rising. Get a roaring fire going and allow it to burn down to white ash. Once the ash turns white, the oven has heated to full temp (judging oven temperature takes practice; stick with it).

When the bread's risen and the oven is heated up, it's time to work quickly. Use a hoe or rake to get the coals out of the way and give the floor of the oven a good mopping with water. Much sizzling will occur; that's okay, it helps the bread form a goodly crust.

Slice the risen loaves laterally and shallowly, flour your peel and transfer your risen dough balls to the oven. (Quickly! The longer the door is open, the more heat you lose!)

Seal the door with waste dough and wait twenty minutes. No peeking! When you knock on the bottom of a loaf, it should sound firm, but a bit hollow. That means they're done.

Smear with fresh butter and enjoy. The finished product should be fragrant, crusty, and just slightly chewy.

Yeast in the 16th Century

Bread and beer were essentially the same in the 16th century: dense repositories of calories and fuel for a hard day at your chosen trade. Beer of the time was often referred to, in fact, as "liquid bread" and rightly so; it was dense, rich, and could almost stand alone if you took the mug away. Bakers and brewers were heavily dependent on one another; the bakers provided warm ovens for brewers to malt their barley, and the brewers provided yeast, scooping it from the foam that forms atop fermenting ale. That yeasty foam is called "Barm" and it's still an excellent source of leavening for bread.

Don't have a batch of ale fermenting in your kitchen? Then you can do what we do and simulate the process...

*Simulated Ale Barm

1/2 cup warm ale

1/2 cup flour

1 packet of yeast

Mix well.

The results will be foamy and thick, and should be scooped into your dough in place of regular yeast.



Want to know more? Want to build your own oven? Check out RenaissanceArtisan.blogspot.com

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