

Rustic Italian Bread - Ciabatta

This recipe is based on Amy's Bread ciabatta recipe. This is very wet dough that develops much of its strength and elasticity while it proofs in the bowl after being mixed. It takes practice to get used to handling and shaping dough this wet but with a little persistence you'll soon be an expert and will want to use this recipe again and again.

Yield: one or two 600 g ciabatta-shaped loaves

Ingredients:

Ingredient	Yeast based	Sourdough	Single sourdough loaf
Warm water (40 - 45°C)	60 g	0	0
Active dry yeast	1 teaspoon	0	0
Poolish starter	460 g	460 g	230 g
Cold water	360 g	420 g	210 g
Unbleached bakers flour	600 g	600 g	300 g
Salt	2 teaspoons	2 teaspoons	1 teaspoon

Equipment: baking stone and wooden peel, one 300 x 430 mm sheet pan

1. Combine the very warm water and the yeast in a measuring cup and stir to dissolve the yeast. Let stand for 3 minutes. In a large mixing bowl, combine the poolish, water and yeast mixture and break up the poolish with your fingers. Add the flour and salt and mix with your fingers to moisten the flour. When all of the flour is incorporated, knead for 4 minutes in the bowl using a dough scraper to lift and turn the dough. The dough should look like a very thick batter, should be very sticky, and will not look smooth. If the dough feels firm or dry, knead in additional cool water a tablespoon at a time.
2. Cover the bowl with a clean shower cap, and let rest for 15 minutes to smooth out and develop elasticity. Knead in the bowl for another 6-8 minutes, lifting and scraping it up with a dough scraper. The dough will already feel stretchy, but will become smooth and develop strength with kneading. Do not knead extra flour into the dough. It should have some strength and elasticity but it will still be soft and sticky and you will not be able to pull a transparent sheet without having it tear. The dough temperature should be around 25° C.
3. Put the dough in an oiled bowl that is large enough to allow it to almost double, cover it with a clean shower cap, and allow it to rise for 1 hour. It should feel puffy but it will not have doubled. Gently fold the dough in from the sides to the middle to degas it, turn it over so the smoother bottom side is up, cover it and let it rise again for 45 to 50 minutes. The dough will almost double during this second rest and it should feel strong and supple by the end of the time period.

4. While the dough rests, prepare a proofing pan for the loaves by lining a 300 x 430 mm sheet pan with baker's linen so it overlaps the sides and sprinkle it with a generous amount of flour; or just line the pan with baking parchment and sprinkle the parchment with a moderate amount of flour.
5. Turn the dough gently out onto a well-floured work surface. By pulling and patting gently with your hands, shape the dough into a big rectangular pillow, about 400 by 230 mm, with the long sides at the top and bottom. Try not to deflate the dough too much. Using a dough scraper, cut the rectangle in half from top to bottom, so you have two 200 by 300 mm pieces, with the short sides at the top and bottom. Ciabatta: At this point the two rectangles of dough could be coated with flour and placed on the floured cloth to rise briefly before being turned over and baked to make a rustic ciabatta. Baking them when they're slightly under proofed guarantees more oven spring which contributes to a more open, airy crumb in the finished loaf.
6. While the loaves are rising, prepare the oven for baking bread by placing a shallow baking dish on the floor of the oven. Place an oven rack two rungs above the baking dish, and put a baking stone on it if you have one. Boil at least 1 cup of water in a jug or kettle. At least 30 minutes before the loaves are ready to bake, preheat the oven to 250° C.
7. About 5 or 10 minutes before the loaves are ready to go into the oven, sprinkle the wooden peel with coarse cornmeal and gently lift each loaf from the proofing pan, turn it over so the bottom becomes the top, and place it onto the peel. The easiest way to do this is to put one hand under each end of the loaf and gently scoot them in toward the center of the loaf so that it will be supported during the move. Try not to stretch the loaves and leave enough space between the two loaves to allow for spreading in the oven. Cover them again with the oiled plastic wrap. This helps to create moisture in the oven prior to baking.
8. When the loaves are ready, the ciabatta does not need to be scored. Use the plastic water bottle to mist the loaves lightly with water. Open the oven and slide the loaves onto the baking stone, being mindful not to stretch them too much, then quickly (but carefully) pour the boiling water into the baking dish and immediately close the oven door. (If you're baking without a stone simply slide the sheet pan with the misted loaves onto the empty oven rack.) After 3 minutes, pour in another [1/2] cup of boiling water. Check the loaves after 20 minutes and rotate them if necessary to insure even browning. Bake them for a total of 30 to 35 minutes or until they are uniformly dark golden brown in color and sound hollow when tapped on the bottom. Cool them completely on a wire rack before cutting them.

Tips and Techniques

We used unbleached bread flour with a protein content of 12% for this dough. If the dough is still weak and not fully developed at the end of step 4 in the recipe, degas it and turn it again. Let it rise for 30 minutes or more until it has almost doubled. Check it again to see if you can pull a transparent sheet. It should be ready to divide at the end of that third turn.

Polish (or sponge)

Yield: 240 or 480 g of starter (as required)

Ingredients:

Ingredient	2 loaves	1 loaf
Sourdough starter	1 tablespoon (20 g)	2 teaspoons (10 g)
Warm water	230 g	115 g
Unbleached bakers flour	230 g	115 g

Equipment: one clear 2 L plastic or glass container with high sides

1. In a clear 2 L plastic or glass container with high sides, add the sourdough starter and the water and whisk together until the starter has dissolved. Add the flour and stir vigorously with a wooden spoon or your hand for 1 minute, until a smooth, somewhat elastic batter has formed. The starter will be thick and stretchy. It gets softer and thinner after it has risen.
2. Let it rise at room temperature for 6-8 hours (or overnight) until ready to use. When it is ready it will have doubled or tripled in volume, and lots of bubbles and small folds will appear on top of the surface of the starter. The starter should be used in the next two to four hours before it begins to deflate.