

Challah

Kurt

Makes 2 large loaves or 4 small loaves

From Peter Reinhart's book, *Artisan Breads Every Day*

Ingredients

- 2¼ cups (18 oz/ 510 g) lukewarm water (about 95°F or 35°C)
- 1½ tablespoons (0.5 oz/ 14 g) instant yeast
- 8 to 10 egg yolks (6 oz/ 170 g), depending on weight
- 5 tablespoons (2.5 oz / 71 g) vegetable oil
- 6 tablespoons (3 oz/85 g) sugar, or 4/2 tablespoons honey or agave nectar
- 1 tablespoon (0.75 oz/ 21 g) vanilla extract (optional)
- 7½ cups (34 oz/964 g) unbleached bread flour
- 2½ teaspoons (0.66 oz / 19 g) salt, or 4 teaspoons coarse kosher salt
- 1 egg white or whole egg, for egg wash
- 2 tablespoons water, for egg wash
- 2 tablespoons poppy seeds, sesame seeds, or a combination, for garnish (optional)

Do Ahead

Combine the water and yeast in a mixing bowl and stir with a whisk to dissolve. Add the egg yolks, oil, sugar, and vanilla and whisk lightly to break up the egg yolks, then add the flour and salt. Use the paddle attachment and mix on the lowest speed for 2 minutes. The dough should be coarse and shaggy. Let the dough rest for 5 minutes.

Switch to the dough hook and mix on medium-low speed for 4 minutes.

Use a bowl scraper to transfer the dough to a lightly floured work surface, then dust the top of the dough with flour. Lightly knead for 1 to 2 minutes, adding more flour as needed to prevent sticking. The dough should be soft, supple, and tacky but not sticky. Form the dough into a ball, place it in a clean, lightly oiled bowl, and cover the bowl with plastic wrap. Immediately refrigerate the dough overnight or for up to 4 days. It will double in size as it cools.

(If you plan to bake the dough in batches over different days, you can portion the dough and place it into two or more oiled bowls at this stage.)

On Baking Day

Remove the dough from the refrigerator about 2 hours and 10 minutes before you plan to bake. Transfer it to a lightly floured work surface and cut it into the desired number of pieces to make strands for braiding, making sure all of the pieces are the same weight. Flatten each piece with your hand, then roll the pieces into a cigar or torpedo shape. After doing this with each piece, return to the first one and roll it out into a rope 10 to 14 inches long. (The bigger the piece of dough, the longer the rope.) Make sure each rope is the same length. (See section below for braiding instructions).

Once the loaves are braided, transfer them to a sheet pan lined with parchment paper or a silicone mat.

Make an egg wash by combining the egg white (or a whole egg) and the 2 tablespoons of water and whisking briskly until thoroughly combined. Brush the entire visible surface of the loaves with the egg wash, then refrigerate any remaining egg wash and let the loaves rise, uncovered, at room temperature for about 1 hour; they won't rise very much during this time.

Brush with the egg wash again, then sprinkle on the optional seeds. A combination of poppy and sesame looks very impressive. Let the loaves rise at room temperature for about 1 hour, or until increased to about 1 1/2 times their original size.

About 15 minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 350°F (177°C), or 300°F (149°C) for a convection oven. Bake for about 20 minutes, then rotate the pan and bake for another 15 to 30 minutes, until the loaves sound hollow when thumped on the bottom and the internal temperature is about 190°F (88°C) in the center. If you used a whole egg in the egg wash, the crust will get darker than with an egg white wash; don't be fooled into thinking the bread is done until it passes the thump and temperature test. The crust of the loaf will seem hard when it first comes out of the oven, but it will soften as it cools.

Cool on a wire rack for at least 45 minutes before slicing or serving.

If you want to use whole eggs instead of yolks in the dough, reduce the water by 2 tablespoons (1 oz / 28.5g) per egg. The yolks are the key to the attractive color and also make a major contribution to the soft texture because they add fat and lecithin, which tenderize the bread. The whites add protein; while that's a good thing, they also dry out the bread. Also, feel free to add another tablespoon or so of honey or sugar if you prefer a sweeter bread.

Braided Loaves

You can make braided breads with 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 strands-or more. The most important principle in braiding loaves is to be sure each strand is the same weight and length. If you don't have a scale, estimate the size as closely as possible. Also keep in mind that the position numbers refer to the actual position of the strands on the counter, starting from your left, rather than to the particular strands; in other words, the number of a given strand changes as it's moved during the braiding process. To form the strands, use the same gentle rocking motion as for shaping baguettes. For all braids, place the prettiest side up when you transfer to the baking sheet, then cover and proof.

To shape a 2-braid loaf, lay 2 strands of equal weight and length on the work surface perpendicular to one another and crossed in the center. Take both ends of the strand that's underneath and cross them over to the opposite sides. Cross the ends of the other strand in the same way. Continue crossing and alternating until you get to the ends of the strands, then pinch the tips together at each end to seal off the ends. Lay the braid on its side.

To shape a 3-braid loaf, lay 3 equal strands side by side, parallel to one another. Beginning in the middle of the loaf, overlap one of the outside strands over the middle strand, then take the opposite outside strand and cross it over the new middle strand. Continue this pattern until you get to the ends of the strands, then pinch the tips together to seal. Rotate the loaf so the unbraided side is facing you, then repeat the pattern on that end.

To shape a 4-braid loaf, connect 4 strands of equal weight and length at one end, spreading the other ends out with the tips facing you. From the left, number the strands 1, 2, 3, 4.

Follow this pattern: 4 over 2, 1 over 3, and 2 over 3. Repeat until you get to the ends of three strands, then pinch the tips together to seal.

To shape a 5-braid loaf, connect 5 strands of equal weight and length at one end, spreading the other ends out with the tips facing you. From the left, number the strands 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Follow this pattern: 1 over 3, 2 over 3, and 5 over 2. Repeat until you get to the ends of the strands, then pinch the tips together to seal.

To shape a 6-braid loaf, connect 6 strands of equal weight and length at one end, spreading the other ends out with the tips facing you. From the left, number the strands 1 through 6 and bring strand 6 over strand 1 to build up the end of the loaf. Strand 5 has now become the new strand 6, and the old strand 6 is now strand 1. Now follow this pattern: 2 over 6, 1 over 3, 5 over 1, and 6 over 4. Repeat the pattern until you get to the ends of the strands, then pinch the tips together to seal.