

# Taste

## Real buns hot from the oven



**Eating in**

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**BUN TIME:** Store-bought buns are fine, but the home-made version is better. The secret is in the yeast.

**H**OT cross buns are a must for most of us for Easter and it can be a great sense of achievement to make your own.

So many of the shop-bought ones are doughy and contain very little fruit.

I was quite amazed to see hot cross buns on the shelves of some supermarkets in the first week of the New Year.

In the 18th century bakers could only sell spiced buns for special occasions. If they ignored this ruling they would be punished and all their bread would be given to the poor! I'm not suggesting punishment for their early appearance but it does tend to diminish their specialness.

Yeast is a delightful ingredient to work with in the kitchen and yet I've heard many in my cookery classes say they get nervous about their ability to successfully cook with yeast.

Bread making machines have brought home made breads into many more homes of late but there is a special charm in the hands-on approach.

There are a couple of rules that mustn't be broken when cooking with yeast and, if you abide by those, there is no reason why you shouldn't have a good result.

Yeast is a living organism and needs to be treated with care. It requires moisture, warmth and food in which to grow and develop into a raising agent for flour-based mixtures. The most important thing to remember is that it will die if it becomes too

hot, which is just above body temperature. Warm, not hot, is the thing to remember. Yeast also grows best in a moist environment so an ideal place for it to prove is over hot water.

I often place a cake cooling rack over the sink or a large basin of hot water and let the warmth and moisture do its job. The hot water cylinder cupboard is also a good spot and I have been known to pop a basin of dough into my bed with the electric blanket on low to get the buns on the rise.

Kneading is a process of both evenly distributing the yeast throughout the dough and developing the elasticity of the gluten in

the flour. This can be done by hand, which I find quite therapeutic, or with a dough-hook in a Mixmaster.

"Proving" is when the covered dough is place in a warm place to grow and develop.

"Knocking back" happens when the dough has proven. The gas that has developed in the growing mixture is knocked out using your knuckles. This process helps to evenly distribute the moisture through the mixture, helps increase the elasticity of the gluten and breaks down the gas bubbles, which improves the finished texture of the product.

Don't be daunted — it is quite simple and

the end result of those delicious hot cross buns will be worth it.

Dried yeast is convenient and reliable. If you are converting a recipe from compressed yeast to dried yeast, a general rule of thumb is to use half the quantity of dried yeast.

Compressed yeast is usually available at health food shops but is often on the supermarket shelves just before Easter. Fresh compressed yeast should be sweet smelling, a light putty colour and should easily form a liquid when combined with sugar. I like using compressed yeast as, in my opinion, it produces a better tasting end result.

**I**HAVE several recipes, which vary from high, almost fluffy buns to today's recipe, based on one from Tudor times. It's from *A Calendar of Feasts*, published by Georgian House. You'll find them quite different from most commercially available ones. This mixture makes 12. I usually double it, because the buns are delicious toasted if they become a little stale. If you don't like crystallised peel, add some extra currants or sultanas.

### Hot cross buns

25g fresh yeast or

1 tbsp dried yeast

50g soft brown sugar

150ml lukewarm milk

4 tbsp lukewarm water

450g plain flour, sifted

½ tsp salt

1 tsp ground mixed spice

½ tsp ground cinnamon

100g currants

50g crystallised orange peel

50g butter, softened

1 egg, beaten

### GLAZE

50g white sugar

3 tbsp milk

Cream the yeast with one teaspoon of the sugar until liquid, then blend in the milk and the water and add 2 tablespoons of the flour. If using dried yeast, just omit the creaming. Mix well and leave to stand in a warm place until frothy (about 20 minutes). Sift the remaining flour, salt and spices into another bowl. Add the brown sugar, currants and peel.

Add the yeast mixture and beat in the softened butter and beaten egg. Mix to a soft but not sticky dough that leaves the bowl clean.

Turn onto a lightly floured board and knead for 3 or 4 minutes.

Cover with a cloth and leave in a warm place to rise until doubled in size.

Turn the dough onto a floured board and knead again for 2 to 3 minutes.

Divide the dough into 12 equal pieces.

Knead each into a round ball, tucking any uneven ends into the base of the ball.

Place on a greased oven tray, leaving room between each two buns.

Cover and allow to rise again for 30 minutes until the dough feels springy.

While the buns are proving, preheat the oven to 220C.

Cut a deep cross in the top of each bun with a sharp knife, then bake in the centre of the

oven for 20-25 minutes. Check one of the buns from the centre of the tray to test if they're cooked.

Remove to a cake cooler.

In a small saucepan dissolve the sugar in the milk and boil for 2 minutes.

Brush the warm buns twice with this syrup to glaze.

**I**also love this spectacular sweet bread from Florence, which has a layer of wine-soaked grapes through its centre and on top. It's really worth the effort that goes into making it.

The grapes should be soaked in Vin Santo, a wonderful Tuscan wine variety, if you can find it. Otherwise use a sweet dessert wine.

Try to keep the dough even, rather than thicker in the middle, so it'll cook evenly.

This recipe of Lorenza de' Medici's is from Claudia Roden's book, *The Food of Italy*, published by Arrow Books Ltd.

### Florentine flat bread with grapes (Schiacciata con l'uve)

2 tbsp fresh yeast or 1 tbsp dried yeast

150ml milk, lukewarm

300g plain flour

130g sugar

pinch salt

500g black grapes, pitted, skin on

200g raisins soaked in Vin Santo or other sweet dessert wine.

Dissolve the yeast in the milk.

If using dried yeast, add it to the dry ingredients, leaving the milk to the end.

Place the flour in a bowl and make a well in the centre.

Add 100g of the sugar, the salt and stir in the yeast/milk mixture.

Knead on a floured board for 5 minutes then cover with a cloth and leave in a warm place until it has doubled in size.

Punch down and shape into two rounds about 22cm across.

Place one on a floured baking tray cover with half the grapes and half the raisins, drained.

Place the remaining dough on top, press down quite firmly and cover with the rest of the grapes and drained raisins.

Preheat the oven to 180C.

Cover the dough and leave until doubled in size.

Sprinkle with the remaining 30g sugar and bake for about 45 minutes.