

Focaccia ON THE RISE

Last fall, Wilmington's finest bakery shut down its ovens. Black Lab occupied the corner of Union and Howland Streets in Little Italy for over ten years and specialized in artisanal breads, Epi baguettes, tomato pies, and my favorite – focaccia. I especially enjoyed the olive and sage, as well as the goat cheese, caramelized onions, honey, and walnut. Due to this void in the focaccia market, I decided to start making my own.

I tested several online recipes, but the best is from a book in my personal cookbook library, Jim Lahey's *My Bread: The Revolutionary No-Work, No Knead Method* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009. Print.) The below instructions are quite simple and can be completed during a Saturday afternoon.

This recipe yields one 13 by 18 inch focaccia.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup peeled Yukon Gold potato, cut into 1 inch chunks
- 2 1/2 cups cool (55 to 65 degrees F) water
- 4 1/2 cups bread flour (I use all-purpose)
- 2 1/2 teaspoons instant or other active dry yeast
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons table salt
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

Put the potatoes and water in a small saucepan, cover, and bring to a boil over high heat. Cook until the potato chunks fall apart when pierced with a fork or knife tip.

Use a blender, an immersion blender, or a food mill to puree the potatoes with the cooking water until smooth. Let the mixture cool to 120 degrees F; it will feel very warm to the touch but not scalding.

In a large bowl, stir together the flour, yeast, sugar, and half the salt. Add the potato puree and, using a wooden spoon or your hands, mix until you have a wet, sticky dough, about 30 seconds. Cover the bowl and let sit at room temperature until the dough is tripled in size, two to three hours.

Lightly oil a 13 by 18 inch rimmed baking sheet. Use a bowl scraper or rubber spatula to scrape the dough onto the baking pan; it will still be quite loose and sticky. Gently pull the dough and stretch it across the surface of the pan, then oil your hands and press the dough evenly out to the edges. Drizzle with three tablespoons of the oil and sprinkle with the remaining salt. Use your fingertips to create dimples all over the surface of the dough. Let the dough rise in a warm, draft-free spot until it has risen just over the edges of the pan, 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Half an hour before the end of the second rise, preheat the oven to 400 degrees F, with a rack in the center.

Gently place the focaccia in the oven on the center rack (the risen dough is delicate; a bump going into the oven could collapse it) and bake for 30 to 45 minutes, until the top is evenly golden brown. Transfer the pan to a rack to cool, and give it at least a few minutes before slicing and serving warm or at room temperature.

The potato may sound like a strange addition, but it allows for less flour resulting in an airier bread. The olive oil also contributes to the crusty texture.

Some recipe modifications I recommend (be creative!):

For a simple preparation, add additional coarse sea salt and pinches of fresh rosemary.

For a meal in and of itself, recreate the focaccia from Amaranth - a New York restaurant on the Upper East Side. Amaranth serves a thin, crispy focaccia, filled with Robiola cheese, small chunks of tomato,



Slices of crusty, airy focaccia.

and arugula and is drizzled with white truffle oil. Instead of forming the above recipe into one large focaccia, divide it into two and form into flat rounds, about ten inches in diameter. Bake each for about 25 minutes, then slice the focaccia as you would a sandwich roll. Carefully remove the top half and sprinkle the bottom half with slices of Robiola, diced tomatoes, and arugula to your liking. Return the top half and bake for an additional few minutes until the cheese is melted.

Top with an assortment of sautéed exotic mushrooms, and bake for an additional few minutes.

Top with whole, peeled San Marzano tomatoes and dollops of ricotta cheese, and return to the oven for a few more minutes. 🍴



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