

PAIN AU LEVAIN: THE FRENCH CLASSIC

Pain au Levain is a basic necessity of the French table-- thicker slices spread with jam for breakfast, thin slices dipped into soft-cooked eggs, and medium slices for the open-faced sandwich called a tartine.

(Makes one 950-gram [2-pound loaf] or two 475-gram [1-pound] loaves)

BASIC LEVAIN

25 g	1 oz	Water @ 90°F
75 g	3 oz	Starter, ripe
50 g	2 oz	All purpose or Bread Flour

Procedure

I. MAKE THE BASIC LEVAIN: (Do one day ahead)

1. Combine the water, ripe starter and flour in a one-quart plastic container. Stir to mix thoroughly. Cover and set in an approximately 70°-80°F environment for 2 to 5 hours. Transfer to the refrigerator for 18 to 20 hours.
2. Bring to room temperature for at least 1 hour before using to make main dough.

MAIN DOUGH

120 grams	4 ounces	Basic Levain (<i>measured from the above</i>)
400 grams	14 ounces	Water (at 90°F)
60 grams	2 ounces	Whole wheat flour (or substitute any type of rye flour or more all purpose or bread flour)
510 grams	18 ounces	All purpose or Bread flour
14 grams	1/2 ounce	Kosher or fine sea salt

Procedure

I. MAKE THE MAIN DOUGH—MIXING PHASE:

1. Add 120 g (4 ounces) Basic Levain to the Water.
2. By hand, combine the ingredients.
3. Add the Whole Wheat Flour and blend. Then add the (All-purpose or Bread) Flour and Salt.
4. Blend by hand or with a plastic scraper until no dry flour remains.
5. Cover.
6. Rest dough for 15 minutes.

II. DEVELOPMENT (i.e., KNEADING) PHASE:

1. By hand or with a machine on medium speed, develop dough for 2 minutes.
2. Cover; rest dough for 5 minutes.

from *How To Bake MORE Bread: Modern Breads/Wild Yeast*
by Michael Kalanty, Red Seal Books, San Francisco, 2016.

3. Repeat Step 1 for 2 minutes more.

III. FERMENTATION PHASE:

1. Coat the interior of an 8-quart container with spray oil or water. Transfer dough to container. Lightly oil or water the top of the dough. Cover the container.
2. Ferment for 1 hour, maintaining dough in the 78° to 82° F range.
3. Gently punch & fold dough.
4. Ferment for 1 more hour, maintaining dough in the temperature range.

Baker's Option

According to your schedule, select one of the following sequences:

Same-day baking:

- A. Shape breads and place in proofing baskets. Let stand 1 hour before refrigerating.
- B. Transfer to cooler overnight.
- C. *The next day* (or up to 3 days), set covered dough at ambient temp for 1 hour.
- D. Proof as needed (**usually 2-2.5 hours**).
- E. Score & Bake breads.

-OR-

Next-day baking:

- A. Ferment dough in bulk in cooler overnight.
- B. *The next day* (or up to 3 days), set covered dough at ambient temp for 1 hour.
- C. Shape breads and place in proofing baskets.
- D. Proof as needed (**usually 3-4 hours**).
- E. Score & Bake Breads.

Whichever sequence you select, the details follow below:

IV. SHAPING PHASE:

1. Transfer dough to a lightly floured bench.
2. Scale as desired. This formula yields one 950 g loaf or two 475 g loaves.
3. Form dough piece(s) into gentle round(s).
4. Cover; let rest 10 minutes.
5. Dust a proofing basket with rice flour.
6. Form dough into final round.
7. Place dough round into basket.
8. Cover dough with lightly oiled plastic.

9. If breads are to be refrigerated overnight, let them sit at ambient temp for one hour prior to refrigerating them. Otherwise, proceed to PROOFING PHASE, Step 2, below.

V. PROOFING PHASE:

1. If required, remove shaped breads from refrigerator. Keep covered.
2. Proof for 2-2.5 hours OR 3-4 hours (depending which of the *Baker's Options* you chose) in an 80° to 85° F environment.
3. Uncover dough and Proof for an additional 30 minutes. This stage allows the dough to form a top skin, making it slide better when loading.
4. Meanwhile, preheat oven to 450° F. Adjust rack so that bread bakes in center of oven. If using a baking stone, place this on the rack to preheat along with the oven. Adjust an additional rack at the bottommost setting in the oven—this is where you will place your tray of water to create steam.

VI. SCORING & BAKING PHASE:

1. TEN minutes prior to baking, place a cake pan (8- or 9-inch diameter) or baking tray on the bottommost rack in the oven. FIVE minutes prior to baking, fill the pan about one-third deep with hot water. Close the door and allow steam to collect in the oven for 5 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, with the bread still in its proofing basket, dust the top with flour.
3. Dust a loading peel with flour. Invert the dough onto the peel. (This procedure is for using a baking stone in the oven. If you do not have a baking stone, simply invert the proofed bread onto a baking tray lined with parchment and dusted with flour.)
4. Score the dough with a serrated knife or baker's lame.
5. Mist with a hand-held water bottle, if available.
6. Load dough into pre-heated oven and shut the door.
7. Bake the bread for 8 minutes.
8. Carefully open the oven door and allow steam to escape.
9. With a gloved hand, remove the pan of hot water and place in the sink or on the stovetop for safety.
10. Shut the oven door.
11. Bake the bread for 8 minutes more.
12. Carefully open the oven door and check the bread—rotate it if it is browning unevenly. Check the bottom crust to see that it is not getting too dark. If so, place an inverted baking tray in the oven (over the stone, if you are using one) and return the bread to the oven.
13. Bake the bread for 8 minutes more.
14. At this time, check the internal temperature with an instant-read thermometer. The dough is thoroughly set when it reaches 200° F.
15. If the crust is dark brown, smells toasty and is hard when flicked with your finger or tapped with a spoon, the bread is done. Remove it and set on a rack to cool for at least 1 hour.
16. If the crust color does not suit you, continue baking. Keep your eye on the bottom crust that it does not burn. This can take an additional 4 or 5 minutes, depending on your oven.