



Rachel Mennies' Houseguest Challah

SERVINGS MAKES TWO 580G LOAVES

PREFERMENT

100g **high-protein all-purpose (or bread) flour**

1 ¾ teaspoons (7g) **instant yeast**

150g **warm water, around 90 to 95 ° F 32 to 35 ° C**

DOUGH

all of the preferment

100g (2 **large**) **eggs**

75g **warm water**

75g **neutral oil, like canola or vegetable**

1 teaspoon **real vanilla extract**

75g **granulated sugar**

550g **AP flour**

10g **kosher salt**

BAKE

1 **whole egg, beaten with a pinch of salt**

1 **PREFERMENT:** Combine the flour, yeast, and water in a large bowl (considerably larger than the preferment ingredients, as this will be where you mix the entire dough). Cover with plastic wrap and let the mixture rest for 20-30 minutes, until visibly bubbly and puffy.

2 **DOUGH:** Whisk the eggs, remaining 75g water, oil, vanilla, and sugar into the preferment. Add the remaining 550g flour and salt and, using a dough whisk, wooden spoon, or a stand mixer (fitted with a dough hook), mix until the dough forms a shaggy, mostly cohesive mass. Turn the dough out onto a clean surface, using any stray flour in the bowl for help with kneading, and knead by hand for about 8-10 minutes (or mix in your stand mixer for 4-5 minutes), until all flour is absorbed and the dough is smooth and stretchy/extensible. Try not to add more flour at this point, if you can help it: the goal here is a tacky dough, but it should not leave dough stuck to your hands as you knead. In that case, a sprinkle as you go works wonders.

3 Place in a greased bowl (I love cooking spray for this) and cover with a lid or the same plastic wrap as for the preferment. Let rise at room temperature until doubled in size (for me, this is usually 90-120 minutes), then punch down dough and transfer to a clean surface.

4 Weigh the dough and divide to the desired size and number of pieces for strands for two loaves: for a three-strand braid, that is six pieces. I like to weigh mine out, but it is not vital—eyeballing your portions will be fine, if you like.

5 I'm going to borrow Cheryl Holbert's shaping suggestion here, as it has made a huge difference in my braids: "Pre-shape [six] strands by pressing each piece into a rectangle and rolling up on itself to create a cylinder shape (kind of like a mini-baguette), then let rest for a few minutes under plastic wrap. Roll strands under your palms to desired lengths."

6 Line a rimmed baking sheet (a standard half-sheet pan will fit both loaves) with parchment and set aside. Braid each challah in a traditional three-strand plait without pulling the strands too tightly, so the dough has room to expand during the final proof. Transfer to the prepared pan, spaced evenly both between one another and the rim of the pan, drape with plastic wrap (ideally) or a clean dish towel, and let the shaped loaves proof until they are noticeably puffier and a finger-poke leaves a slight

indentation, about 45 minutes. At least 30 minutes before loaves are proofed, set an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 375°F (190°C).

7 BAKE: Uncover, brush with egg wash, and sprinkle on any desired toppings (sesame seeds and/or poppy seeds are traditional options!) Bake, rotating the tray 180 degrees after about 15 minutes for even baking, until loaves are deep golden brown on the exterior and 195°F (90°C) on the inside, 28 to 30 minutes. (Optionally: For a darker, shinier "bakery challah" finish, give un-topping-ed loaves another coating of egg wash when you rotate it.)

8 Transfer loaves to a wire rack and let cool to room temperature before slicing and enjoying. Leftovers can be stored wrapped in foil at room temperature; they will remain fresh for a day or so on the counter before becoming perfect for challah French toast. Alternately, the loaves freeze well wrapped in foil, then sealed in a plastic bag for many months.

I baked this recipe both with and without a preferment. I noticed no difference in the final flavor and the interior crumb also looked the same, but the preferment made the dough much livelier (more bubbles and a more visible bulk rise) and gave it a beautifully voluminous second proof. I am convinced that this is the path to avoiding an absolutely great, but slightly less aesthetically "perfect" challah braid with pulls between the strands.

If you wish to skip the preferment for any reason, add the amounts of flour and water to their corresponding values in the dough, along with the yeast.