

THE ULTIMATE Challah

Seventy-five MOMENT readers across the country—from Alaska to Hawaii, Florida to Maine, Texas to Minnesota and Canada too—submitted entries to the Ultimate Challah Contest (June 1992). Some were old family recipes, replete with raisins, poppy seeds and honey. Others were variations on the old theme—loaves made with whole wheat flour, olive oil, oats, brown sugar, chopped apples, cream, yogurt and various herbs and spices. One baker suggested adding chocolate chips; another baked chopped onions into her loaves!

We divided the recipes into two categories: traditional and non-traditional. Helen Nash, author of *Helen Nash's Kosher Cuisine* and *Helen Nash's Kosher Kitchen* (Random House, 1989 and 1988) lecturer and teacher selected the traditional-recipe winners; Lisë Stern, editor of the bimonthly *Cookbook Review* (617-868-8857), chose the winners from the non-traditional category. Both judges looked for outstanding flavor, texture and consistency and clear and accurate recipes. ☺



Helen Nash

Tackling the Braid

Braiding *challah* properly is complicated. Helen Nash suggests bakers try using just three strands of dough, which is easier than the standard six but still looks pretty. Lisë Stern recommends Gloria Kaufer Greene's *The Jewish Holiday Cookbook* (Random House Books, 1985) for illustrated instructions on braiding with four, five and six strands. The results, she's found, are beautiful and professional looking.



Helen Nash's Traditional Challah Winners

Challah from Heaven

1st Nutritious, with good texture and appearance; just two risings!

Submitted by Evely Laser Shlensky of Santa Barbara, California. Adapted from a recipe published in the *Glencoe News*.

makes three loaves
1¾ c. water
½ c. honey
½ stick margarine
1 Tbsp. salt (scant)

8½ c. flour (approx.)
2 pkgs. active dry yeast
4 eggs

In a saucepan place 1¾ c. water and ½ c. honey. Blend in ½ stick margarine and 1 Tbsp. salt. Warm at low heat to 120-130° (I use a candy thermometer).

Pour 3¼ c. flour into a large electric-mixer bowl. Blend in yeast.

Pour warmed liquid mixture into flour-yeast mixture. Add 4 slightly beaten eggs. Beat ½ minute at low speed. Scrape sides.

Beat 3 minutes at high speed.

Gradually add about 4¼ c. flour, mixing by hand. When dough is difficult to stir, flour your hands and breadboard, dump mixture on board and begin kneading. Add flour and knead until dough becomes smooth and elastic and no longer sticks to your hands.

Wash and lightly grease bread bowl. Round the dough and drop it into the bowl. Give it a full turn and flip it over in the bowl. Cover with damp cloth or kitchen towel and let rise in a warm place, but not the oven, until it doubles in bulk, about 1½ to 2½ hours.

Punch dough down in bowl. Remove it and divide it into 4 equal parts. Divide each of the 4 parts into 3 parts. With 9 of the pieces, roll rope-shaped strands of about a foot each. Make 3 braids by pinching 3 strands together, braiding and pinching the other ends. From the 3 pieces which were not used for the loaves, make 3 small braids by dividing each piece in thirds, rolling and braiding. Attach these to the top of the loaves by pinching in various places along the small braids.

Place each loaf on a slightly greased cookie sheet. Cover with dry towels and let rise until almost double (1-2 hours).

Beat an egg and brush it on the loaves in all the crevices. Sprinkle with poppy or sesame seeds. Bake at 350° for about 25 minutes or until nicely browned.

Esther's "Can't Go Wrong" Challah

2nd Quick—just one rising!

Submitted by Ann Coe of Jackson Heights, New York.

2 c. warm water
½ c. oil
½ c. sugar
8-plus c. flour

2 pkgs. dry yeast
3 eggs
2 Tbsp. salt
1 c. raisins (optional)

Add yeast and 1 Tbsp. sugar to the warm (not hot) water in a small bowl. Add oil and then eggs to water/yeast mixture.

Place flour, remainder of sugar and salt in a large bowl. Add wet mixture to dry ingredients and stir with spoon until moistened. Use hands to thoroughly mix ingredients.

When dough is sticking together, remove food from bowl and place on clean, dry, lightly-floured surface.

Knead 8-10 minutes, until dough is firm and elastic but not very sticky to the touch of dry hands (you may need to add some extra flour).

Place kneaded dough in a large clean bowl which has been lightly coated with oil, cover with towel and place in a warm spot.

Let dough rise until double in bulk—about 1 hour. Remove from bowl, place on lightly floured dry surface and punch down.

Braid strands into loaves and make rolls. Place on ungreased cookie sheet and brush with beaten egg yolk mixture (yolks of 2 eggs, plus 1-2 Tbsp. of water, beaten with a fork). Sprinkle loaves/rolls with sesame or poppy seeds, if desired.

Bake at 425° for 10 minutes or until tops of loaves/rolls are golden brown; lower temperature to 350° and bake another 20 minutes or until done (loaf should sound hollow when tapped on the bottom).

Jennifer's Challah

3rd Slightly sweet, with a cake-like yet airy texture. Submitted by Jennifer Rosenberg of Walnut Creek, California, who writes: "I got this recipe only as a list of ingredients in the order to be added, rising times and baking time and temperature. Over the 15 years I have been making it, I have worked out the following method."

2 pkgs. dry yeast
1 Tbsp. sugar
½ c. warm water
4 eggs (room temp)
4 tsp. salt

½ c. honey
1 c. vegetable oil
1¼ c. more warm water
7-8 c. unbleached all-purpose flour
1 egg for glaze

Mix the yeast and sugar in a large mixing bowl. Add the ½ c. warm water, allow yeast to dissolve slightly. Mix well and let stand for five minutes until mixture foams.

Whisk the eggs, salt, honey and oil together in another bowl and add to the yeast mixture. Stir in the remaining 1¼ c. warm water. With a wooden spoon, beat in the flour, a cup at a time. When the dough has absorbed enough flour to come away from the sides of the bowl and is ragged but not spongy-wet, turn onto a heavily floured board.



Lisè Stern's Non-Traditional Challah Winners

Rosemary Challah

1st A light, exotically flavored, delicious-tasting loaf! Submitted by Irwin L. Lebow of Washington, D.C. A liberal adaptation of a recipe by Ruth Brooks in *Food for Thought* (Sisterhood of Temple Emunah, Lexington, Mass., 1972).

Makes 2 large or three medium loaves

¼ c. lukewarm water (approx. 110°)
3 envelopes dry yeast (quick-rising)
½ c. honey
1⅞ c. lukewarm water
¾ c. vegetable oil
poppy seeds or sesame seeds

1 Tbsp. salt
3 Tbsp. dried rosemary
4 eggs
7 c. bread flour (approx.)
1 egg, beaten

Dissolve the yeast in the ¼ c. water. Combine the honey, 1⅞ c. water, oil, salt and rosemary in the bowl of electric mixer. Add the eggs and the yeast mixture and mix thoroughly.

Add the flour slowly while mixer is running at slow speed. Mix in as much flour as the mixer can handle. Mix in the remaining flour by hand. (A large, heavy-duty mixer can handle all the flour.) You may want to reserve a little of the flour for the kneading which follows.

Turn out the mixture onto a floured surface and knead for 10-15 minutes. (Note that the density of the dough can be adjusted by the amount of flour added during kneading. To keep the dough light, oil your hands rather than adding flour when the dough gets sticky.)

Place the dough in a lightly-oiled bowl, cover with a towel or plastic wrap, set in a warm place and allow to rise until doubled in bulk—one to two hours, depending upon the temperature.

Punch down, turn out of bowl and knead for a minute or two. Return to the oiled bowl for a second rising, again until doubled in bulk.

Punch down, turn out on surface, knead for a minute and divide according to the number of *challah* to be made. Divide each of these pieces into a number of equal portions according to your braiding method.

Braid loaves, place on a greased cookie sheet and allow to rise for 30 to 45 minutes. Brush with beaten egg and sprinkle with poppy or sesame seeds, if desired.

Bake in a 350° oven for 45-55 minutes, depending upon the size of the loaves.

For High Holidays, substitute anise for rosemary, add raisins after second rising and shape into round loaves.



Lisè Stern displays her freshly-baked challah.

Knead the dough, adding flour as necessary, until the dough is smooth, elastic and only slightly sticky (roughly 10 minutes). Turn the dough into a greased bowl, turning it over so top is slightly oiled, cover with a clean cloth and let rise about 1½ hours, or until it doubles in bulk. (Dough is sufficiently risen when it does not spring back when two fingers are poked in it.)

Punch down the dough, form into a ball again and return to the bowl to rise a second time until doubled in bulk. (This rising may be accomplished in the refrigerator overnight, with the bowl covered with plastic wrap to prevent the dough from forming a dry crust. I do this frequently so that the loaves may be baked Friday morning.)

Punch down the dough and divide in half. Cut one half into three or four pieces and roll each piece into a rope about 15 inches long. Braid the ropes into a three- or four-strand braid, then place on a greased baking sheet. Repeat with the other half of the dough. Cover the loaves and let rise 45 minutes.

Place the loaves in an oven preheated to 350°. Beat the egg for the glaze in a small bowl. After the loaves have baked for 5 minutes, brush with the egg. Brush again after another 5 minutes. Bake a total of 50-60 minutes, or until loaves are a deep golden brown and sound hollow when tapped on the bottom. Cool before slicing.

Makes two large loaves. Freezes well wrapped in plastic wrap and then aluminum foil.

Nora's Challah

2nd Slightly dense and rich with a subtle, sourdough flavor. Submitted by Nora Shukovsky of Naples, Florida. Her recipe, she writes, evolved through years of experimentation.

Sponge
1 medium potato
½ pkg. regular dried yeast

¾ c. potato water cooled to 105°-115°
1 tsp. sugar (scant)
1 c. bread flour

Peel, slice and boil potato until soft. Cool to 105°-115°. Mash in ¼ c. of potato water.

Dissolve yeast in potato water with sugar in a large bowl. Add mashed potato and beat in well. Add enough flour to make a pancake-like dough. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside overnight.

In the morning:

1½ pkgs. regular dried yeast
½ c. water, 105°-115°
1 tsp. sugar (scant)
3 large eggs, room temp.,
beaten until light

½ c. sugar
½ Tbsp. salt
½ c. Puritan, corn or peanut oil
½ c. currants (optional)
8-10 c. bread flour

Dissolve yeast and 1 tsp. sugar in water in measuring cup. Add to sponge and beat in. Add eggs and beat in well. Add sugar and beat in well. Beat in salt. Add oil and beat in well. Add currants, if using, and beat in. Beat in as much flour as you can. Add flour as needed to knead dough thoroughly on counter or with dough hook and then on counter to finish kneading after using a machine. The dough will be elastic and fairly smooth when well-kneaded. It will quickly return to an evenness with the rest of the dough after the "finger" test.

Grease a 5-quart bowl with unsalted corn oil margarine (such as Fleischmann's). Set dough in pot or bowl and turn so both sides are greased. Cover well with plastic wrap. Let rise until doubled, about 1½ hours in 78-80° area.

Punch down. Knead lightly. Divide in half. Cover one half while working with first half. Divide first half into 4 plumpish, equal lengths. Form into a free-form four-braided loaf. Set on half of a Pam-greased cookie sheet. Cover with plastic wrap. Repeat with second half of dough and set on other half of cookie sheet. Let double, covered with plastic wrap, until doubled—about ¾ hour—at 78-80°.

Preheat oven to 450°. To glaze loaves: mix thoroughly 1 egg (at room temperature), 1 Tbsp. oil and 1 tsp. sugar. Using a soft brush, apply glaze to tops of loaves. If not using currants, sprinkle loaves with poppy seeds and/or sesame seeds.

Set loaves in oven—one level down from top in a 30-inch oven—and immediately reduce heat to 350°. Bake 25-35 minutes, or until loaves test done and are golden all over. Cool on racks. Makes two plump Sabbath loaves.